NATION

Cold wave grips T'gana, North with record low temp

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BUSINESS

Mkt extends losses into 3rd session on foreign outflows

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SPORTS

Rain plays spoilsport again as 3rd Test ends in a draw

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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

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Oppn seeks Shah's ouster over Ambedkar barb

Oppn asks PM to sack Shah or face protests; TMC moves privilege motion against HM

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

A massive political row erupted on Wednesday as Congress and Opposition parties launched an all-out attack on Home Minister Amit Shah for his remarks on BR Ambedkar and demanded his sacking, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP leaders rallied to his defence and said he has exposed Congress' "anti-Ambedkar" stand.

As Opposition parties unitedly protested against Shah and stalled both houses of Parliament, alleging that his remarks had insulted Ambedkar and demanding his apology, Shah said that Congress had distorted his comments under a malicious campaign after the discussion on the Constitution "established" that it was against Ambedkar and reservation.

On the last day of Constitution debate, Shah attacked Congress saying, "It has become a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar'. If they had taken God's name so many times, they would have got a place in heaven."

Coming to Shah's defence, Modi hit out at Congress, saying its "rotten ecosystem" and "malicious lies" cannot hide its misdeeds and said Shah had exposed its "dark history of insulting" Ambedkar.

Congress, YMC, AAP, RJD, SP, Sena (UBT) and the Left protested against Shah inside Parliament and outside.

Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien submitted a notice to move a privilege motion against Shah in the Rajya Sabha, where the Home Minister made the remarks.

Opposition MPs hold portraits of Dr BR Ambedkar during a protest amid the Winter Session in New Delhi on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

Congress Chief Mallikarjun Kharge warned that there will be a countrywide agitation if Shah does not resign.

Kharge demanded that Shah resign or else Modi should sack him. Asked about Kharge's demand, Shah said he can quit if it would make Kharge happy but it would never solve his problems.

"I want to tell the Modi if he has even little respect for Babasaheb, he should dismiss Shah from his post before midnight," he said. The uproar in Parliament also spilt onto the streets of the national capital and other states like Maharashtra, Bihar and Tamil Nadu where various parties held protests. In Delhi, AAP's Arvind Kejriwal led a protest with hundreds of supporters outside BJP office. *—PTI*

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> **Shah's remarks on Ambedkar reflected the BJP's same old mentality. There is nothing new in the statement. They are not able to execute their old plans because of Babasaheb Ambedkar and they will continue to sulk** - Prakash Ambedkar, BR Ambedkar's grandson

Priyanka, Anurag & 29 others in ONOE Bill JPC

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) tasked with examining the 'One Nation, One Election' Bill has been constituted comprising of 31 members, including 21 MPs from Lok Sabha. The JPC, includes Congress leaders Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and Manish Tewari, SP's Dharmendra Yadav, TMC's Kalyan Banerjee, NCP (SP) leader Supriya Sule, Shiv Sena's Shrikant Eknath Shinde, and BJP leaders Sambit Patra, Anil Baluni and Anurag Singh Thakur. *—PTI*

State's KV Narayana wins Sahitya Akademi Award

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Kannada linguist and researcher KV Narayana's work, 'Nudigala Alivu was selected for 2024 Sahitya Academy Award. The award carries a cash prize of Rs 1 lakh and a citation. The awards will be presented at a function in New Delhi on 8 March. Hailing from Kampalapur, Periyapatna, Narayana received his early education in his hometown. He went to Bengaluru for higher education. He has authored more than 22 works. *—Agencies*

Two Monkeypox cases reported in Kerala

T'PURAM, 18 DEC

Two cases of Mpox were reported in Kerala, state Health Minister Veena George said on Wednesday. Two men, who recently returned to Kerala from the UAE, tested positive for the disease, she said. One of the men from Wayanad was initially found to be infected, and the second person, from Kannur, tested positive later, according to her statement. Following the reports of the disease, the Health Department directed those who came in contact with the patients to monitor for any symptoms. *— PTI*

Russia develops cancer vaccine, to distribute it for free

MOSCOW, 18 DEC

Russia on Wednesday announced that it has developed an mRNA vaccine against cancer and will distribute it to cancer patients for free. Russian news agency TASS reported that vaccine has been developed in collaboration with several research centand is expected to be released for public use by early 2025. It will cost the state 3,00,000 rubles (USD 2,869) per dose. Earlier, TASS news agency reported that the cancer vaccine could suppress tumour growth, preventing the spread of the disease. *—PTI*

CM: K'taka will not remove temples built on Waqf land

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday assured the Assembly that the government will not remove those temples which are built on Waqf properties.

In case notices have been served to them, then they will be withdrawn, he said.

During a discussion on the issue of the Waqf Board issuing eviction notices to farmers, temples and many other individuals, the Chief Minister said, "If temples have been built on Waqf properties then we will not remove them."

Stating that BJP was misleading people on the Waqf issue, Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda announced in the Assembly that the government will issue khatas for Hindu temples and graveyards, even if they were located on waqf property.

As the raging Waqf issue echoed in the Assembly with the BJP raising it, the Waqf and Minority Affairs Minister B Z Zameer Ahmed Khan clarified that if notices were given to farmers and temples then they will be withdrawn.

The Chief Minister underlined the need to save the Waqf properties saying that there were 1.10 lakh acres of Waqf properties in the state which now reduced to just 20,000 acres due to various provisions of law such as the Inam Abolition Act as well as encroachment. *—PTI*

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Assembly clears Mysuru Development Authority Bill

Karnataka Assembly on Wednesday passed the Mysuru Development Authority Bill that seeks to replace the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA). According to the bill, MDA will consist a Chairperson, a Commissioner who will be ex-officio member, a Finance Member, an engineer from Karnataka Engineering Service, a town planner, an architect, a deputy secretary rank officer from the Urban Development Department, two legislators from Karnataka, four members including a woman and an SC/ST community member, a representative each from the Karnataka Urban Water Supply and Sewerage Board, ESCOM and Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation. *—PTI*

BACK DELHI CHALO PROTEST

Cops foil farmers' bid to stall trains in Mysuru

MYSURU, 18 DEC

Police on Wednesday foiled an attempt by a few farmers' associations to disrupt train services at the Mysuru city railway station in a bid to show solidarity to the farmers protesting at Shambhu and Haryana – Delhi border.

The protest was organised by the State Sugarcane Growers Association (SSGA) and a few other farmers' organisations under Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM).

When the protesters tried to enter the city railway station, police arrested SSGA president Kuruburu Shanthakumar, along with other activists. The protesters raised slogans against the Centre for its failure to fulfil its promises to farmers, such as legal guarantees for the minimum support price (MSP). A few activists, who had entered the city railway station prior to the arrival of other activists, squatted on the tracks for a few minutes. Police, however, arrested and removed them from the tracks. The protesters also expressed concern over deteriorating health of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on a hunger strike at the Haryana – Delhi border in support of their demands.

Farmers dies in Shambu

57-year-old man, who allegedly attempted suicide at Shambhu border amid farmers' protest on 14 December by consuming some poisonous substance, died at the Government Rajindra Hospital here on Wednesday, farmer leaders said.

—Salar News with Agencies

Mumbai: 13 dead after Navy boat collides with ferry

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Thirteen persons died and 99 others were rescued after a Navy craft crashed into a ferry off the Mumbai coast on Wednesday, the Navy said.

At about 4 pm, a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja near Mumbai, the Navy said in a statement. The ferry was carrying passengers from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Island, a popular tourist destination.

"Four naval helicopters, 11 naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats were involved in the rescue efforts," the Navy said.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis told reporters in Nagpur that 101 people were rescued. *—PTI*

India, China agree to maintain peace at border

BEIJING, 18 DEC

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Wednesday held "substantive discussions" during the Special Representatives dialogue here and reached a six-point consensus, including continuing to take measures to maintain peace at borders and promote healthy and stable development of relations.

During their meeting, the first after a gap of five years, both sides positively evaluated the solution reached between the two countries on border issues and reiterated that the implementation work should continue, according to a press release by the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Ajit Doval **PHOTO: PTI**

Both sides also agreed to further strengthen the Special Representatives' mechanism, bolster diplomatic and military negotiation coordination and cooperation, and requiring the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on China-India Border Affairs (WMCC) to do a good job in the follow-up implementation of the decisions reached special representatives' meeting, it said.

The two sides agreed to hold a new round of Special Representatives' meetings in India next year, and the specific time will be determined through diplomatic channels.

After the talks, Doval called on Chinese Vice President Han Zheng. *—PTI*

India's 'spin' king Ashwin quits cricket

BRISBANE, 18 DEC

India's premier off-spinner R Ashwin on Wednesday stunned the cricketing world by bidding adieu to his international career in the middle of the ongoing Test series against Australia here despite having a "bit of punch left" in him.

The 38-year-old retires from the game as the second highest wicket-taker for India in Tests with 537 scalps in 106.

In the limited-overs format, being part of the 2011 World Cup and the 2013 Champions Trophy-winning teams would count among the highlights of his career. He will continue to play club cricket, including the IPL. Rohit said Ashwin had been thinking about retirement for a while and had spoken to him about it during the opening Test in Perth. "...He felt that if I am not needed right now in the series, I am better off saying goodbye to the game," Rohit revealed. *—PTI*

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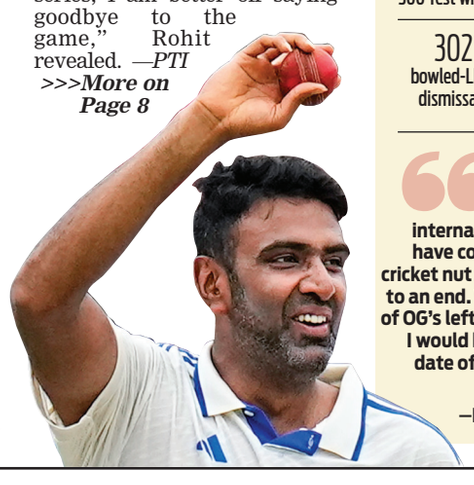

ASHWIN IN NUMBERS

Ashwin wore many hats as an active international cricketer and leaves a great legacy behind. Here are his biggest achievements

287 matches	474 Test wickets at Home, 2nd to Anil Kumble
765 wickets, 2nd most by India	109 wickets via bowled
37 5 wicket hauls	4,394 runs
537 Test wickets, 2nd fastest to 500 Test wickets	6 centuries
302 bowled-LBW dismissals	11 Player of the series awards

> **The cricketer in me, the Indian cricketer, international cricketer might have come to an end, but the cricket nut in me will never come to an end. We are the last bunch of OG's left in the dressing room. I would be marking this as my date of having played at this level**
>
> —R Ashwin, Indian cricketer

5 DEAD AS JEEP COLLIDES WITH 3 BIKES IN KOLAR

KOLAR, 18 DEC

Five people, including three men and two woman, were killed near Gudipalli Cross under the Nangali police jurisdiction in Mulbagal Taluk on Wednesday when a Bolero jeep collided with three two two-wheelers they were riding.

The deceased are Radhappa, 45; Venkataramappa, 45; his wife Alamelamma, 30; all residents of Konanakunte; and Chikkavenkataramappa, 40, from Nagenahalli village in Mulbagal taluk. According to Kolar Superintendent of Police B Nikhil, Chikkavenkataramappa's wife, Gayathri, who was hosptalised at the SNR Hospital in Kolar succumbed to injuries later.

The incident occurred when the victims were returning home on their two-wheelers. The Bolero jeep, heading towards N Vaddahalli carrying empty crates for the tomato market, collided with the vehicles from the opposite direction.

The crash's impact was so severe that the jeep fell into a roadside gorge, spilling its crates onto the road.

Manikanta, the driver of the Bolero jeep, also sustained injuries in the crash.

He was admitted to a nearby hospital but is reported to be out of danger. *—Salar News*

NOT FUNCTIONAL, SAYS MUSK

Starlink devices found in Manipur

IMPHAL, 18 DEC

SpaceX founder Elon Musk said Starlink satellite beams were turned off over India, reacting to claims that its device was being used in restive Manipur.

The security forces recently seized some internet devices along with arms and ammunition during a raid in Keirao Khunou in Imphal East.

The Indian Army had shared photos of the items with "Starlink logo" seized on X.

An X user posted, "@Starlink is being used by terrorists. Hope, Elon @elonmusk looks into it and help control misuse of this technology."

Musk replied, "This is false. Starlink satellite beams are turned off over India."

The seized items include one internet Satellite Antenna, one internet Satellite Router and 20m of cables. The recovery of the Starlink-like device has also prompted agencies to investigate how the equipment found its way to state.

The seized items include one internet Satellite Antenna, one internet Satellite Router and 20m of cables **PHOTO: X**

The army handed over the device to the Department of Telecommunications and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology for forensics analysis, with an official saying. "Initial reports suggest that they were not operative." Musk's Starlink, which provides satellite internet services, does not have a licence to operate in India. Meanwhile, five IEDs, weighing a total of 21.5 kg, were found in Manipr's Imphal East district, police said on Wednesday. *—PTI*

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TRUMP VOWS RECIPROCAL TAX ON INDIAN GOODS

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

US President-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday said India charges "a lot" of tariff, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products.

"Reciprocal. If they tax us, we tax them the same amount. They tax us. We tax them. Almost in all cases, they're taxing us, and we haven't been taxing them," Trump said.

"The word reciprocal is important because if India charges us 100 per cent, do we charge them nothing for the same?" Trump said. Meanwhile, US exuded confidence that India and it will be able to mend their relationship after Sikh separatist Pannun row and bribe charges against Gautam Adani. *—PTI*

Cold wave to grip parts of State for next 3 days: IMD

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

Cold wave conditions are likely to persist over Bidar, Vijayapura, and Kalaburagi districts of Karnataka, with temperatures expected to be 2-4 degrees Celsius "below normal" in the remaining districts of North Interior Karnataka for the next three days, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Wednesday.

Dry weather is forecast to continue across the state between 18-22 December.

According to the IMD, cold wave conditions are expected over Bidar, Vijayapura, and Kalaburagi districts. In the remaining districts of North Interior Karnataka, temperatures will be 2-4 degrees Celsius below normal.

Isolated places in interior Karnataka may experience shallow fog/mist until 2 December.

For 23-24 December, the IMD has predicted "light rain" at isolated places over Chikkaballapur, Kolar, Bengaluru Rural, Bengaluru Urban, Ramanagara, Chamarajanagara, and Mysuru districts.

During this period, dry weather is expected to persist over Coastal Karnataka, North Interior Karnataka, and the remaining districts of South Interior Karnataka.

- For 23-24 December, the IMD has predicted "light rain" at isolated places over Chikkaballapur, Kolar, Bengaluru Rural, Bengaluru Urban, Ramanagara, Chamarajanagara, and Mysuru districts

IMD said, "Cold wave conditions are likely to prevail over Bidar, Vijayapura, and Kalaburagi districts, with temperatures 2-4 degrees Celsius below normal in the remaining districts of North Interior Karnataka for the next three days. After that, a further fall in minimum temperatures is expected in North Interior Karnataka."

The IMD also added, "Minimum temperatures will fall by 2-4 degrees Celsius from normal over the next three days, followed by a gradual decrease in minimum temperatures in South Interior Karnataka. No significant change in minimum temperatures is expected over Coastal Karnataka." —*PTI*

Bengalureans experienced cloudy and cold weather on Wednesday
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

6-day Niranthara Ranga from 25 Dec

MYSURU, 18 DEC

City-based Niranthara Foundation will organise its 16th annual theatre festival Niranthara Ranga from 25 to 30 December at Kirurangamandir on Kalamandir premises. Theatre artiste Sugana MM said the foundation has dedicated this year's festival to promote the works of writer Kuvempu. Samatanto will present a one woman show, Nirmadala Hoovinondigeby, by Indira Nair on 25 December at 7pm. The event will be inaugurated by Kannada Development Authority Chairman Dr Purushottama Bilimale on 26 December. It will be followed by Tindige Banda Tunderaya, a play based on Bertolt Brecht, at 7pm. Sugana there will be more such events on every day of the event till it concludes on 30 December.
—*Salar News*

'Koosina Mane a blessing for working mothers'

MYSURU, 18 DEC

Joint Director of Tourism, MK Savitha, highlighted the vital role played by caretakers under the 'Koosina Mane' initiative, which provides care for the children of working mothers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in rural areas of the district. She was speaking at the inauguration of a training program for Koosina Mane caretakers, held at the T Narasipura Taluk Panchayat office. Savitha explained that the state government launched the initiative to support children under the age of three whose mothers are engaged in MGNREGA work.
—*Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

Aster RV Hospital launches ABC Guru Campaign

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

Aster RV Hospital launched the Active Bleeding Control (ABC) Guru campaign with the participation of 200 students from Bengaluru. Addressing the NCC cadets of Delhi Public School (DPS) Bengaluru South, Dr Sujatha Thyagarajan, Senior Consultant & Head of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), highlighted that uncontrolled bleeding can result in death before professional help arrives. She stressed the critical importance of an immediate response to prevent such outcomes. DPS Bengaluru South is the first institution to take the initiative and support this noble cause by providing training for its students. On 13 December, 24 NCC cadets from DPS, a sub-unit of 1 KAR BN NCC, participated in a comprehensive 6-step training session to become ABC Gurus. The cadets underwent a 2-hour training session that included a pre-test, the 6-step training process, and a post-test quiz.
—*Salar News*

LURKING DANGER

Roads near Safina Plaza in Bengaluru have been dug up for civic services, making it difficult for the public to shop for Christmas celebrations in the area
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Shah wouldn't be HM without Ambedkar: CM

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday hit out at Union Home Minister Amit Shah for his remarks on BR Ambedkar, calling it an insult to the chief architect of the Constitution. Shah's remarks in Parliament are just an extension of long-standing RSS ideology, he said.

He said without Ambedkar's contributions, Shah wouldn't be the Home Minister and Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister.

He was referring to Shah's remarks taking a swipe at the opposition, during a debate on the Constitution in the Rajya Sabha. For the Congress party and him (Siddaramaiah), Ambedkar is not a "fashion" but an "eternal inspiration", he said.

In an open letter to Shah, the Siddaramaiah said, "First, let me congratulate you for finally speaking the truth by openly revealing the BJP's real opinion about Babasaheb Ambedkar. Your statement in Parliament didn't surprise us; we already knew your party's true mindset. But now, the entire country has seen your lack of respect for the architect of the Indian Constitution."

Siddaramaiah said had Dr Ambedkar not been born, he wouldn't have had the privilege of becoming the Chief Minister and might have been herding cattle in his village. Social Welfare Minister HC Mahadevappa said that it is the Constitution drafted by Babasaheb that is protecting the oppressed people and not the God.

He also accused BJP of using the forums of state legislative Assembly and Council for politics, instead of discussing real issues like development of the state, highlighting faults of the government and advising it. In another development, Siddaramaiah has directed all the top government officials not to transfer people in their respective departments, without his permission.

"It has been advised that since the general transfer period is over, if it is necessary to transfer people in any department in administrative and public interest, the prior approval of the Chief Minister should be obtained," an administrative note issued by the Chief Minister said. —*PTI*

MUDA scam: RTI activist says CM's wife 'luring' him

MYSURU, 18 DEC

RTI activist Snehamayi Krishna on whose complaint a case was registered in the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) site allotment scam said that a person claiming to be personal assistant of Parvathi BM, wife of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, "attempted to lure and pressurise" him and his son.

He said that he was asked not to push for a CBI probe . Snehamayi Krishna had recently approached the Karnataka High Court seeking directives to transfer the case from the Lokayukta police to CBI. He said that he filed a case with Lokayukta SP TJ Udesha.
—*Salar News with PTI*

Waqf row: Withdrawal of notices not enough, says BJP

Hundreds face hardship due to Waqf notices, says Ashoka

BELAGAVI, 18 NOV

BJP MLA Araga Jnanendra on Wednesday demanded that properties mentioned in government records as Waqf should be removed as the mere withdrawal of notices will not serve the purpose.

This was as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah assured the Assembly that the government will not remove those temples which are built on Waqf properties.

The Leader of the Opposition BJP's, R Ashoka, justified the demand by saying that there were 110 Kuruba families in the Krishna Raja constituency, in Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's home district of Mysuru, who have been running from pillar to post to get the notices removed. They have submitted several memoranda to Siddaramaiah, but to no avail. He said there are hundreds of such instances where people face hardship by such notices.

Jnanendra said, "We (BJP) too support saving the Waqf properties but our point is why notices were given now." Siddaramaiah said the situation was such that there was a need to save the properties and notices were given as there is a Central law for it.

The clarification was necessary now because a march was taken out from Bidar by the Vijayapura BJP MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal from Bidar, he explained.

"There is a political split in BJP but I won't discuss your internal matter," Siddaramaiah quipped.

He was referring to the differences between Yatnal and BJP State chief BY Vijayendra. As a show of strength, Yatnal decided to take out a march from Bidar to Chamarajanagar with the support of 12 senior BJP leaders including MP and MLAs.

He accused BJP of politicising the issue and reminded that despite the attempt to communalise the atmosphere in the state, BJP lost the recent bypolls in Assembly segments, Channapatna, Sandur and Shiggaon. Not satisfied by the explanation given by the government, BJP staged a walkout from Assembly. —*PTI*

BJP's R Ashoka during a protest demanding a greater share in internal reservation for 49 nomadic communities in Belagavi ***PHOTO: X/@BJP4KARNATAKA***

BJP attacks ruling Congress over maternal deaths

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

BJP on Wednesday launched a scathing attack on the ruling Congress government over the recent maternal deaths in the State, alleging the medical department itself was "ailing" and under the control of a "medical mafia."

The Leader of the Opposition R Ashoka made the remarks in the State Assembly and claimed the problem was not just confined to Ballari alone, which saw five deaths in just one month, but also seen in Raichur, Chitradurga and Davangere as well.

He said the department is "ailing" due to the substandard drugs being supplied resulting in maternal deaths.

He demanded that the government should order a judicial inquiry headed by a sitting High Court Judge to probe the maternal deaths.

He also alleged that certain medicines which have psychotropic effects are being sold to drug addicts, which is a matter of concern. —*PTI*

ACTOR DARSHAN DISCHARGED FROM HOSPITAL

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

Actor Darshan Thoogudeepa was on Wednesday discharged from a private hospital in Kengeri, where he had been admitted since 30 October, and he left for his wife Vijayalakshmi's residence, sources said.

On 30 October, High Court granted the actor interim bail for six weeks on medical grounds, following his arrest for the alleged murder of his fan Renukaswamy. Darshan had complained of back pain.

Dr Naveen Appaji said that the actor was experiencing back and leg pain and would undergo a series of tests to determine the cause. He and actor Pavithra Gowda were charged with the kidnapping and alleged murder of 33-year-old Renukaswamy. —*PTI*

9-year-old City boy critically injured after tree branch falls on him

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

A nine-year-old boy was seriously injured after a tree branch allegedly fell on him in the City on Wednesday, police said.

The incident occurred at around 8am on Nandi Durga road when the boy and his father were travelling to school on a two-wheeler, they said.

In his complaint, the man explained that as they reached Nandi Durga Road, a tree branch suddenly fell, causing both of them to fall off the vehicle.

"We live in MRS Palya. The route to school and back is via Nandi Durga road. I drop my son off daily on my two-wheeler. This morning, as we were on our way, a tree branch fell on us, and both my son and I fell to the ground. Some autorickshaw drivers saw us and rushed us to the hospital," said David, the boy's father.

David sustained a minor shoulder injury, while his son suffered a severe head injury and is now under observation in the ICU, police said.

After the incident, David filed complaints with the BBMP and the local police station.

Based on his statement, a case has been registered under the relevant sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita against BBMP officials, with further investigation underway, police said. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

- David sustained a minor shoulder injury, while his son suffered a severe head injury and is now under observation in the ICU, police said

AMID 10.2% GSDP GROWTH

State expects strong growth from agri sector

BELAGAVI, 18 DEC

Karnataka is expecting a promising economic growth due to good south-west monsoon, the state government said in its report.

In its 'Mid-year review of state finances 2024-25', which was tabled in the Assembly on Tuesday, the Congress government said the state economy will be on growth trajectory with positive outlook in agriculture sector.

The report said that the state's GSDP had registered a growth of 10.2 per cent in nominal terms for 2023-24.

"The growth trajectory of the State economy is likely to continue at steady pace with positive outlook in agriculture sector, which has significantly picked up due to good south-west monsoon. This will contribute to both supply and demand side factors behind GSDP growth," the report said.

According to the report, Karnataka registered a growth in revenue receipts of 13.8% over the corresponding period of the previous year ***PHOTO: ANI***

The government said that its efforts to promote economic growth, including favourable policies, infrastructure development, and incentives to attract both domestic and international businesses point to a promising future for Karnataka.

These initiatives are expected to create employment opportunities and industrial and service sectors, it noted.

According to the report, Karnataka's fiscal performance in the first half of 2024-25 has been exceptional, registering a growth in revenue receipts of 13.8 per cent over the corresponding period of the previous year.

"The State continues to hold the second position in total GST revenue contributions to the country. A growth of 11 per cent has been achieved in total GST revenue generated from State in first half of 2024-25 compared to 2023-24," the government said. —*PTI*

ISRO begins LVM3 Assembly for Gaganyaan mission

BENGALURU, 18 DEC

ISRO on Wednesday announced that it has commenced the assembly of the Human-Rated Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (HLVM3) for Gaganyaan's first uncrewed flight at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh.

ISRO called it a major step towards India's maiden human spaceflight and future space ambitions.

The event coincides with the 10th anniversary of the Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3-X/CARE (Crew module Atmospheric Reentry Experiment)) mission, conducted on 18 December.

The addition of the highly reliable Crew Escape System (CES) has increased confidence for the manned missions. Escape provision exists for the crew during all phases of ascent till injection of the module into orbit.

HLVM3 is a three stage vehicle with a payload capacity of about 10 tonnes to Low Earth Orbit, which is 53 meters tall and weighs 640 tonnes. —*PTI*

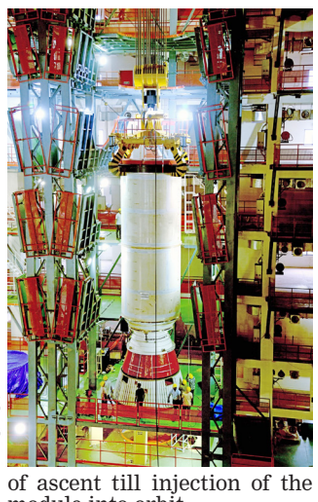


PHOTO: X

Parl Panel flags states' failures in protection of SCs

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

A parliamentary panel has raised concerns over the failure of several states to establish the necessary mechanisms to effectively address cases of atrocities against Scheduled Castes (SCs). In its report tabled in Lok Sabha on Wednesday, the committee noted that despite the absence of financial constraints at the central level, many states were not utilising available funds or taking necessary actions to address these issues. The committee underscored that tackling atrocities against SCs requires "sincere and coordinated" efforts by state governments, supported by central resources. The panel urged more stringent monitoring mechanisms, including regular reviews by senior officials and the organisation of state-level workshops. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

PM to visit Kuwait on 21-22 Dec

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Kuwait on Saturday on a two-day trip to further strengthen "multifaceted" ties between India and the Gulf nation. It will be the first visit to Kuwait by an Indian prime minister in over four decades. Modi is paying the visit at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. During the visit, Modi will hold discussions with the leadership of Kuwait and will also interact with the Indian community. India is among the top trading partners of Kuwait. The Indian community is the largest expatriate community in Kuwait. "The visit will provide an opportunity to further strengthen multifaceted ties between India and Kuwait," MEA added. *—PTI*

'Jungli Murga' on HP CM's menu: Fake news case filed

SHIMLA, 18 DEC

Police here registered a case of defamation and spreading false news on Wednesday after a video surfaced online, showing Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu encouraging his associates to eat "Jungli Murga" (Grey Junglefowl) during a dinner in a remote area here. Police said the case has been registered against unknown people based on a complaint of Kulag village head Suman Chauhan and another local Nitu Kumar. Last week, the video was widely circulated online in which Sukhu is purportedly heard saying, "Inko do Jungli Murga, hume thodi khana hai (Give them Jungli Murga, I don't want to eat)." He then asks his companions if they wish to eat the dish. *—PTI*

Protest against Guv: 4 SFI workers held, 100 booked

T'PURAM, 18 DEC

Four activists of the Student's Federation of India (SFI), the students' wing of the ruling CPI(M), have been arrested in connection with a protest staged by the outfit against Governor Arif Mohammed Khan at the Kerala University Senate campus here, police said on Wednesday. They were arrested on Tuesday evening and released on bail later, Cantonment Police said. The case was registered for unlawful assembly, taking out a march without permission and so on, he added. The Senate campus, located in the heart of the city, witnessed the dramatic protest of the Left students' union on Tuesday. Despite the tight security laid by police, the SFI activists had forcefully opened the closed gates of the campus and ran towards Senate Hall. *—PTI*

Priyanka, Anurag among MPs on ONOE's JPC

Panel will include 31 members; 21 from LS and 10 from RS

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Former Union ministers Anurag Thakur and PP Chaudhary from the BJP, and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra of the Congress are set to be among the 21 Lok Sabha members, who will be part of the joint committee of Parliament that will scrutinise two bills on simultaneous elections.

The Lok Sabha's list of business for Thursday included the names of 21 MPs to be part of the committee, a motion on whose constitution will be moved by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal.

Former Union minister Parshottambhai Rupala, Bhartruhari Mahtab, Anil Baluni, C M Ramesh, Bansuri Swaraj, Vishnu Dayal Ram and Sambit Patra are among the BJP's Lok Sabha members to be part of the panel.

Chaudhary, a former minister of state for law, is seen as the likely chairperson of the committee, sources said, adding that Thakur is also a contender.

Cong's Priyanka Gandhi & ex-union minister Anurag Thakur PHOTO: PTI

Speaker Om Birla will take the final call according to the rules.

Manish Tewari and Sukhdeo Bhagat of the Congress, Shrikant Shinde of the Shiv Sena, Dharmendra Yadav of the Samajwadi Party, Kalyan Banerjee of the TMC, T M Selvaganapathi of the DMK, G M Harish Balayogi of the TDP, Supriya Sule of the NCP (Sharad Pawar), Chandan Chauhan of the RLD and Balashowry Vallabhaneni of the Jana Sena Party are other Lok Sabha members.

Rajya Sabha will name its 10 members for the committee in a separate communication.

Among the Lok Sabha members proposed to be on the committee, 14 are from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, including 10 from the BJP. *—PTI*

Kharge, Rahul attend PM-led NHRC panel

New Delhi, 18 Dec

A committee led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi met here on Wednesday to select the next chairperson of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), sources said.

They also said Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and party leader Rahul Gandhi attended the meeting as leaders of the opposition in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha respectively.

—PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar and farmers during a meeting, in Delhi, on Wednesday PHOTO: PTI

'CM, Uddhav meet a welcome change'

NAGPUR, 18 DEC

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Wednesday labelled the meeting between Shiv Sena (UBT) head Uddhav Thackeray and CM Devendra Fadnavis a "welcome change."

Uddhav and his MLA son Aaditya Thackeray on Tuesday met Fadnavis and Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar on Vidhan Bhavan premises in Nagpur. Aaditya said they extended good wishes to the two and talked about taking a step towards showing political maturity and working together in the interest of the people.

Shinde said those who had been "over the moon" after the Lok Sabha poll results and "planning to jail us" if they returned to power after assembly elections were now meeting the chief minister.

Meanwhile, Opposition members walked out of the Maharashtra legislative council on Wednesday after they were not allowed to discuss Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on BR Ambedkar.

BJP MLA Gopichand Padalkar also denied on Wednesday reports that he was upset over not getting a berth in the Maharashtra cabinet.

Meanwhile, Shiv Sena MLA Suhas Kande on Wednesday dared his political rival and OBC leader Chhagan Bhujbal to resign from NCP over his exclusion from cabinet. *—PTI*

UP & Assam Congress workers die during protests

LUCKNOW/GUWAHATI, 18 DEC

Congress workers from Uttar Pradesh and Assam died during the party's protest near on Wednesday.

Police said 28-year-old Prabhat Pandey, a native of Gorakhpur, was brought dead to hospital from Congress office. UP unit chief Ajay Rai claimed that he died due to "police brutality".

Ajay Rai, state in-charge Avinash Pande and several other protesting leaders and workers were detained as they tried to leave the party office here for their planned siege of the state assembly during the ongoing Winter Session.

Opposition was protesting against UP government over issues like farmer, unemployment, inflation, privatisation.

The Congress' Uttar Pradesh chief Ajay Rai, state in-charge Avinash Pande and several other leaders and workers were detained PHOTO: PTI

Assam Cong worker 'killed due to tear gas'

A Congress worker was killed and several others were injured in tear gas shell smoke during a protest on Wednesday against a range of issues, including unrest in Manipur and bribery charges against Adani Group, the party claimed.

A senior police officer, however, said the exact reason for the death will be known after the post-mortem examination report comes, and denied that anyone was injured in the incident.

Congress Legal Cell member Advocate Mridul Islam, 45, felt suffocated when a tear gas cell fell near him, party spokesperson Bedabrat Bora claimed. *—PTI*

EAM, Israel Minister talk on West Asia

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday held a phone conversation with his Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar amid signs of a possible ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

There have been a flurry of diplomatic engagements in the last few days for the proposed ceasefire and hostage release deal after months of deadlock in the negotiations between the two sides.

Around 95 hostages are reportedly in the custody of Hamas in Gaza.

"Pleased to speak to FM @gidonsaar of Israel today. Appreciate his briefing on the ongoing developments in the region. Also discussed our bilateral relations and efforts to strengthen them," Jaishankar said on 'X'.

"Look forward to meeting in person," he said.

The two foreign ministers understood to have also discussed the situation in Syria following the collapse of President Bashar Assad's regime 11 days back.

Rebel forces overthrew Assad's authoritarian government on December 8 after capturing several other prominent cities and towns.

Assad fled to Russia after the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) took control of Damascus, marking the end of his family's 50-year rule.

In its reaction, India pitched for a peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process in that country. *—PTI*

S Jaishankar PHOTO: PTI

MP Cong gift ₹5L piggybank to suicide victims' kids

BHOPAL, 18 DEC

Congress leaders have gifted a Rs 5 lakh 'gullak' (piggybank) to the children of a couple who committed suicide after accusing the ED and some BJP members of harassment in Madhya Pradesh's Sehore district.

They said the gesture was in keeping with sentiments of Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, to whom these children had gifted their piggybank when he visited the state as part of his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

Former minister Sajjan Singh Verma, state Congress media department's chairman Mukesh Nayak and other party leaders reached Ashta town in Sehore district on Tuesday to meet the two children of the deceased businessman Manoj Parmar and his wife Neha.

Talking to reporters in Ashta town, Verma said "As per sentiments of respected Rahul Gandhi, the Congress has fulfilled its duty by gifting a piggybank to the children and will support them in their hour of crisis and grief. We will also take the responsibility of their education and other needs." *—PTI*

Reclaim Ayodhya mosque land: BJP leader to Yogi

AYODHYA, 18 DEC

A BJP leader has written to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, asking him to reclaim the land allotted for the construction of a mosque in Ayodhya, claiming that no substantial endeavour has been taken to build it.

In 2019, the Supreme Court paved the way for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya at the site where the 16th century Babri Masjid once stood. It also ruled that an alternative five-acre plot would be found for a mosque in the holy town.

The Sunni Central Waqf Board later formed the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation to build a new mosque on the land allotted by the state government in the Dhannipur area of the district.

BJP leader Rajneesh Singh on 10 December wrote to the chief minister, saying that so far "no substantial endeavour has been undertaken by the Muslim community to construct the mosque".

"The land allocated to Sunni Central Waqf Board in Ayodhya is being used for other purposes," Singh said. He appealed to the chief minister to instruct officials of the Ayodhya mosque trust to use the land in compliance with the Supreme Court orders or return the land to the government to prevent its misuse.

The Sunni Central Waqf Board later formed the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation to build a new mosque on the land allotted. *—PTI*

BIREN SEEKS NAGA BODIES' HELP TO RESTORE PEACE

IMPHAL, 18 DEC

Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Wednesday sought support from Naga bodies in Senapati district to help restore peace in the violence-hit north-eastern state and asserted that his government was working hard to bring unity among communities.

"The role of the Naga Peoples' Organisation, Senapati District Students' Association, United Naga Council Headquarters and other societies is huge in protecting the unity and integrity of the state and strengthening indigenous communities of Manipur," he said. *—PTI*

AAP to launch free treatment of elderly after poll win: Kejri

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal Wednesday announced that 'Sanjivni Yojna' would be launched for free treatment of people aged above 60 years after his party returns to power in Delhi.

Assembly polls in Delhi are due in February next year.

Kejriwal said registration for the scheme will begin within two-three days.

AAP volunteers would go door to door for registration of the eligible elderly for the scheme, he said at an event at the party headquarters here.

PHOTO:X

After the elections, the AAP government will implement the scheme, Kejriwal added.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena has written to Chief Minister Atishi, slamming the AAP government over a "deliberate lapse" in tabling CAG reports in the assembly and advising her to summon a special session on December 19 or 20 to do so. *—PTI*

NO SOCIAL MEDIA

Umar gets interim bail for 7 days

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

A Delhi court on Wednesday granted seven days interim bail to former JNU student Umar Khalid to attend a family event on several conditions, which include refraining from social media.

Khalid has been asked not to meet anyone except his friends, relatives or family members, or visit places except those mentioned in his plea.

"During the interim bail period, the applicant shall not use social media. The applicant shall only meet his family members, relatives and friends. Applicant shall remain at his home or the places where the ceremonies of the marriage, as mentioned, by him will take place," said additional sessions judge Sameer Bajpai's order.

Umar Khalid PHOTO: PTI

Khalid sought the relief to attend his cousin's wedding on 1 January, 2025.

Khalid was directed to furnish a personal bond of Rs 20,000 along with two sureties in the like amount.

Among other conditions, the judge asked Khalid not to contact any of the witnesses or persons connected to the case in any manner.

Following the completion of the interim relief, he would have to surrender before authorities on 3 January evening. *—PTI*

WILL FACE FORMULA-E ROW LEGALLY, SAYS KTR

HYDERABAD, 18 DEC

Against the backdrop of Telangana Governor giving a nod to proceed against him over alleged irregularities during previous BRS regime with regard to conducting Formula-E race, party leader KT Rama Rao said that he would face the cases against him legally.

Governor Jishnu Dev Varma has given permission to file a case against Rama Rao, also an MLA, over the issue.

In a post on X, the BRS working president alleged that the state's Congress government could not get any funds from the Centre but is keen on filing cases.

KT Rama Rao PHOTO: PTI

"Will face you legally. Bring it on," he said.

Speaking at a BRS meeting here on Tuesday evening, Rama Rao said he is ready to discuss the allegations in Legislative Assembly during the ongoing winter session.

He said there should first be a debate in the Assembly on people's issues, including the Congress government's six poll 'guarantees' and the problems of farmers, auto drivers, handloom workers and others, followed by the allegations against the BRS government.

Official sources on Monday said the law would take its course in the Formula-E race issue in view of the governor's nod and that the state's Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) would investigate the matter.

The Telangana government had written to the governor earlier in November seeking permission to register an FIR against Rao over alleged irregularities. *—PTI*

SC grants extension in terror transfer plea case

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Supreme Court on Wednesday gave banned JKLF chief Yasin Malik and five others two weeks to respond to the CBI's plea to transfer the trial in two terror cases from Jammu to New Delhi. A bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Manmohan has requested that six accused in the Jammu and Kashmir kidnapping case, Yasin Malik, transfer the trial to a new location. The case has been listed for further hearing on 20 January, 2025, as the Central Bureau of Investigation has not responded to the six accused. The bench also noted that one accused, Mohammed Rafiq Pahloo, has passed away, and the trial against him would abate. The CBI argued that Malik, the top leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, was a threat to national security and could not be taken outside the Tihar jail premises. *—PTI*

Pak issues 84 visas to Indians to visit Katas Raj temples

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Pakistan high commission on Wednesday said it issued 84 visas to Indian pilgrims to visit the Shree Katas Raj temples in Punjab province's Chakwal district. The group has been given visas to visit the Katas Raj temples from 19 to 25 December. The temples are also known as Qila Katas. It is a complex of several Hindu temples connected to one another by walkways. Under the provision of a bilateral protocol on visits to religious shrines, Sikh and Hindu pilgrims from India visit Pakistan every year. Pakistani pilgrims also visit India every year under the protocol. Pakistan's Charge d'Affaires Saad Ahmad Warraich wished the pilgrims a "spiritually rewarding" and a "fulfilling" journey. *—PTI*

HC quashes Assam SOP for buffalo, bulbul fights

GUWAHATI, 18 DEC

The Gauhati High Court quashed an Assam government SOP of last year that permitted buffalo and bulbul fights during the Magh Bihu festival, stating that if it wanted to allow these traditional activities it could amend the existing laws. A bench of Justice Devashis Baruah passed the order on Tuesday in response to petitions filed by PETA India. The Assam state government has halted buffalo and bulbul bird fights, which were previously banned due to wildlife protection laws and a 2014 Supreme Court order. The state government suspended bulbul fights after they resumed after nine years, citing injuries and forced fighting over food. The petitioner claimed injured buffaloes were forced to fight through beatings. *—PTI*

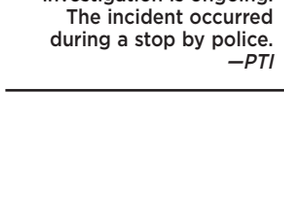


PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

4 held for creating ruckus at Karan Aujla's concert

GURUGRAM, 18 DEC

Three doctors and a medical student were arrested for allegedly causing a ruckus in an inebriated state and assaulting a police officer as they attempted to force their way into singer Karan Aujla's concert here, the police said on Wednesday. Four doctors, Abhay, 26, Divyanshu, 23, and Rishabh, 21, were arrested after attempting to forcibly enter a concert. The incident occurred on Sunday evening when they attempted to enter the venue. Four suspects were arrested after a ruckus and injury to a policeman. An FIR was registered at Badshahpur police station, and they were taken into judicial custody. Further investigation is ongoing. The incident occurred during a stop by police. *—PTI*

Cold wave grips T'gana, North with record low temp

Hyd records 7.2°C, lowest temp the city has seen since 1966

HYDERABAD/DELHI/ CHANDIGARH/ SRINAGAR, 18 DEC

The minimum temperature in New Delhi is forecasted to be 6 degrees Celsius, while the maximum will be around 24 degrees Celsius **PHOTO: PTI**

The cold weather in Telangana on Wednesday continued causing significant disruptions, with temperatures continuing to drop. Since Tuesday night, the intensity of the cold has increased, bringing temperatures in many areas down to single digits.

In Hyderabad, the cold is intensifying daily. The previously recorded lowest temperature in Hyderabad was 6.1°C way back in 1966.

Moula Ali and the University of Hyderabad recorded the lowest temperatures at 7.2°C, followed by BHEL area at 7.4°C, marking the coldest temperatures Hyderabad has seen in recent years

Delhi

According to IMD foggy conditions in the national capital, are likely to persist on Thursday and the day after due to the influence of western disturbances.The minimum temperature is forecasted to be 6 degrees Celsius, while the maximum will be around 24 degrees Celsius.

Punjab and Haryana

Intense cold weather conditions continued to grip several areas in Punjab and Haryana, with Faridkot being the coldest place in the region, recording a minimum temperature of 0.9 degrees Celsius, officials said. Amritsar recorded a minimum temperature of 4.3 degrees, while Ludhiana and Patiala registered minimums of 5.6 and 5.9 degrees Celsius, respectively.

Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states, recorded a low of 6.6 degrees Celsius. In Haryana, Hisar recorded a low of 2.7 degrees Celsius, while Sirsa and Karnal were also swept by severe cold, with both places recording lows of 3.8 degrees Celsius.

Kashmir

There was a slight improvement in the intense cold conditions in Kashmir as the minimum temperature rose across the valley, but continued to settle below the freezing point.

Srinagar city recorded a minimum temperature of minus 4.5 degrees Celsius ' slightly up from minus 5.3 degrees Celsius the previous night, the officials said.

They said the intense cold conditions over the past few days led to the freezing of the fringes of several water bodies, including the Dal Lake here, while water supply lines in many areas of the city here and elsewhere in the valley were also frozen due to the cold.

Gulmarg recorded a low of minus 5 degrees Celsius ' a degree down from the night before. *—PTI*

Farmers block railway tracks as part of their state-wide 'Rail Roko' protest on the outskirts of Amritsar, on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

Farmers' protest hits rail services

CHANDIGARH, 18 DEC

Train services in Punjab were affected as farmers squatted on rail tracks on Wednesday as part of their three-hour 'Rail Roko' protest to press the Centre into accepting their various demands, including a legally binding minimum support price for crops.

Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said farmers have been squatted on rail tracks at many places from 12 noon to 3pm.

The Humsafar Express from Jammu to Sealdah, Dadar Express from Amritsar to Mumbai and Shan-e-Punjab Express from New Delhi to Amritsar were halted at different platforms of the Ludhiana railway station. The Shatabdi Express coming from New Delhi for Amritsar was halted at Khanna railway station.

For the past three weeks, Punjab farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border point between Punjab and Haryana.

Besides a legal guarantee on MSP for crops, they are demanding a debt waiver, pension for farmers and farm labourers, no hike in the electricity tariff, withdrawal of cases and "justice" for the victims of the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence. *—PTI*

14-year-old J'khand girl dies after being raped

Villagers caught the accused and beat him up till police reached the spot and took him into its custody **PHOTO: PTI**

CHAIBASA, 18 DEC

A 14-year-old girl, who was found lying unconscious near an Anganwadi centre after allegedly being raped by a man in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district, died on Wednesday at a hospital in Odisha, police said.

Family members of the girl lodged a complaint with the Jagannathpur Police Station, alleging that the minor was raped, a senior officer said.

"According to villagers, the minor with torn clothes was found lying unconscious near an Anganwadi centre on Tuesday evening. She was taken to a community health centre and later admitted to a sub-divisional hospital in bordering Odisha where she breathed her last while undergoing treatment," Jagannathpur Police Station in-charge Shivnarayan Tiwari. A postmortem examination of her body would be conducted during the day to ascertain the exact cause of death, he said.

"The accused was arrested and would be produced before a court here. An FIR was also registered," Tiwari said.

Villagers caught the accused and beat him up till police reached the spot and took him into its custody, another police officer said. *—PTI*

Pregnant gangrape survivor dies after 5 months in UP

AZAMGARH, 18 DEC

A gang rape survivor has succumbed to injuries at the district women's hospital here, five months after the assault that had led to her getting pregnant, officials said on Wednesday.

According to them, the 40-year-old woman, who was five months pregnant, had been battling deteriorating health since the attack.

Superintendent of Police (Rural) Chirag Jain said the mentally challenged woman had been struggling since her husband's death 10 years ago.

She had a 20-year-old son and her family barely made ends meet, he noted. "In July, four to six men allegedly gangraped her and it went unnoticed until her health declined significantly," Jain said.

The SP said three constables donated blood when the hospital alerted them about the victim's critical condition.

"Despite intensive care, she died during treatment on Monday night," the officer said, adding the police have intensified their efforts to arrest the named suspects. *—PTI*

UP locals seek temple reopening, admin seeks ownership papers

VARANASI, 18 DEC

The district administration here has started looking for the ownership papers of a temple closed for four decades after a group of people demanded that it be reopened, officials said on Wednesday.

Additional District Magistrate, City, Alok Verma said, "We came to know about this temple through newspapers. In the next three-four days, we will probe it."

"Our team of legal advisors is looking into its ownership. If the temple is declared public property, then it will be opened for everyone," he said.

On Monday, several people led by Sanatan Raksha Dal's Uttar Pradesh president Ajay Sharma, gathered in the Madanpura area here, demanding that the temple be reopened.

Sharma clarified that the effort to reopen the temple is not to cause any dispute or conflict. "It is located in an area now predominantly inhabited by members of the Muslim community. The temple premises is filled with dirt and debris," Sharma said.

A team of district administration and police officials had reached the temple on Tuesday to look into its ownership papers **PHOTO: ANI**

- On Monday, several people led by Sanatan Raksha Dal's Uttar Pradesh president Ajay Sharma, gathered in the Madanpura area here, demanding that the temple be reopened

He claimed that the surrounding land, once owned by Hindus, is now inhabited mostly by Muslim families, leading to the temple being abandoned over time.

A team of district administration and police officials reached the temple on Tuesday to look into its ownership papers.

DCP (Kashi Zone) Gaurav Banswal said that according to the locals, the temple has been closed for about 40 years. *—PTI*

Exclude Rs 120cr from airlift charges: Kerala HC to Centre

KOCHI, 18 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

The Kerala High Court on Wednesday asked the Centre whether it can exclude around Rs 120 crore from the Rs 132 crore demanded as airlift charges for rescue operations carried out by the IAF in the state since 2006.

A bench of Justices AK Jayasankaran Nambiar and Easwaran S said if the Rs 120 crore was freed up in this manner, the amount can be utilised immediately for the rehabilitation of the landslide victims in Wayanad.

The bench asked the Centre to consider giving permission to temporarily free up the Rs 120 crore and relaxing the NDRF/SDRF norms so that the amount can be utilised for the rehabilitation purpose.

"It is for a noble cause, so the central government should not have a problem," the court said and listed the matter on 10 January to await the Centre's response on the aspect.

During the hearing, the bench also said that the sending of the bill of Rs 132 crore as airlift charges in October right after the state sought financial assistance from the Centre for rehabilitation of Wayanad, was a "psychological move".

A demand of Rs 132 crore has been raised upon the Kerala government by the Defence Ministry for rescue operations carried out by the IAF in the state from 2006 and after the devastating landslides that wiped away three villages in Wayanad district. *—PTI*

Oxygen pipe stolen in MP, 12 newborns breathless

RAJGARH, 18 DEC

The theft of an oxygen supply pipe at the state-run Rajgarh district hospital in Madhya Pradesh left 12 newborns in discomfort with breathing difficulties, officials said on Wednesday.

The theft disrupted the oxygen supply to the Newborn Intensive Care Unit, triggering panic as newborns started crying due to breathing difficulty. An official said they restored the oxygen supply by deploying a jumbo cylinder, averting a potential tragedy. *—PTI*

SC calls retired HC judges' pension pitiable

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Supreme Court on Wednesday lamented the meagre pension, ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000, being given to some retired High Court judges and termed it "pitiable". The apex court asked the authorities to have a "humane approach" instead of adopting a "legal approach".

A bench of Justices BR Gavai and KV Viswanathan was dealing with a batch of pleas raising the issue of different pension being payable to retired High Court judges.

One of the key reasons was that the High Court judges, who have been elevated from district judiciary, were covered under the New Pension Scheme.

While those, who have been elevated to the High Court from the Bar, were the beneficiaries of the Old Pension Scheme leading to the mismatch in the pension payable to two sets of High Court judges.Attorney general R Venkataramani mentioned the matter before the bench and requested for a hearing in January, 2025. The bench posted the hearing on 8 January.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has dismissed the Tamil Nadu government's plea challenging a Madras High Court order transferring to CBI the investigation into the Kallakurichi hooch tragedy in which 67 people died after consuming illicit liquor. *—PTI*

Former-deputy SP, 5 others die in J&K fire

KATHUA/JAMMU,18 DEC

A former deputy superintendent of police and his three-year-old grandson were among six people who suffocated to death when their rented accommodation caught fire in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua district early on Wednesday, an official said.

Four other people injured in the incident were undergoing treatment in a hospital.

According to police, locals noticed the house on fire around 2.30am and rushed to rescue its occupants. A house filled with smoke suffocated its occupants in their sleep, and six, including two minors, were declared 'brought dead' at the Government Medical College Hospital in Kathua. The deceased have been identified as 81-year-old former deputy SP Avtar Krishen Raina, his daughter Barkha Raina, 25, son Takash, 3, 17-year-old Ganga Bhagat, 15-year-old Danish Bhagat and 6-year-old Advik, a police officer said.

Those injured and undergoing treatment are 61-year-old Swarna (the wife of Avtar Krishen Raina), Neetu Devi, 40, Arun Kumar, 15, and a 69-year-old woman, he said.

Dr Surinder Atri, the principal of the hospital, said, "Ten people were brought to the hospital. Six were brought dead, and four others were injured."

The police have registered a case and initiated an investigation into a tragic incident involving smoke inhalation and suffocation, with no reported burn injuries. *—PTI*

CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING

Families took loans to send Georgia victims abroad

CHANDIGARH, 18 DEC

Many among the 11 Indian nationals who were found dead at a restaurant in Georgia's mountain resort of Gudauri last week, had taken loans or debts to move abroad.

The victims were employees of an Indian restaurant named Haveli in Gudauri.

Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs had said the initial inspection found no signs of injury or violence. All victims died from carbon monoxide poisoning, local media reported, citing police.

Thirty-five-year-old Sandeep Singh from Tarn Taran was the sole breadwinner of the family.

His father Balwant Singh said he had taken a loan of Rs 6 lakh to send his son to Georgia.

Sandeep's wife Baljit Kaur said with his death, the family is left with no source of income here. Twenty-four-old Gagandeep Singh, who hailed from Ghal Kalan village in Moga, had gone to Georgia four months ago. His father Gurmukh Singh, a labourer, had taken a debt to send him to Georgia. He said he spoke to his son on 12 December. Ravinder Kumar, 45, last called up his family in Kot Ramdass in Jalandhar for the last time on 13 December. His wife Kanchan said, "On Friday, he called up and spoke to the children. He told them there was a big storm and poles were uprooted. He promised to call again in the morning. But that call never came." Ravinder Singh and his wife Gurvinder Kaur, hailing from Sunam in Sangrur, were also among the deceased.

One of their relatives said they had gone to Georgia this March this year.

The grief-stricken families appealed to the Centre and the Punjab government to take necessary steps in getting back the bodies for the last rites. *—PTI*

Gurwinder Kaur and Ravinder Singh from Sangrur district, Punjab died just four days before their marriage anniversary **PHOTO: X**

1 IN A BILLION ROUND EGG

A rare one-in-a-billion perfectly spherical egg was sold for Rs 21,000 at a charity auction in the UK. This unusual egg, which defies the typical ovoid shape, hit the headlines after being bought on a whim by Ed Pownell, a resident of Lambourn. Pownell, who initially acquired the egg for Rs 16,000 after a night at the pub, donated it to the luventas Foundation, a charity supporting youth mental health in Oxfordshire The charity later auctioned the egg

PHOTO: X

To defend Adani, BJP accuses US of 'deep state' in India

BJP recently accused the US State Department and "deep state" elements in Washington of trying to destabilise India.

BJP leaders also accused a group of investigative journalists and Congress of collaborating with them to attack Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

The accusations were a surprise as both countries have gone to great lengths in recent years to boost political, economic and defence ties.

The accusations were a surprise as both countries under PM Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden have gone to great lengths in recent years to boost political, economic and defence ties ***PHOTO: PTI***

What did the BJP say?

BJP accused Congress of using articles by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) that "singularly focused" on the Adani Group and its alleged closeness to the government to undermine Modi.

The party cited a French media report that said the OCCRP was funded by the US Agency for International Development and "other deep state figures" like 92-year-old billionaire George Soros.

"A French investigative media group has revealed that 50 per cent of OCCRP's funding comes directly from the US State Department," Sambit Patra, a BJP national spokesperson, told reporters earlier this month at a media briefing by the party. "OCCRP has served as a media tool for carrying out a deep state agenda."

What's the case involving Adani?

The Adani Group is a massive industrial conglomerate that is considered to have close ties with the BJP government and Modi.

But its chair, billionaire businessman Gautam Adani, was recently indicted in the US for allegedly paying over $250 million in bribes to secure contracts in India's energy sector.

The bribes were allegedly offered to Indian government officials to secure "lucrative solar energy supply contracts" with state-owned electricity distribution companies.

The group has termed the allegations "baseless." Following the US indictment, opposition lawmakers in India, including Congress' Rahul Gandhi, called for investigations into Adani's financial dealings. They also alleged that Modi's government was shielding Adani from investigation and arrest.

How did the US respond to BJP's allegations?

A State Department spokesperson said the US government provides support for professional development and capacity building for journalists, but this "does not influence the editorial decisions or direction of these organizations."

"It's disappointing that the ruling party in India would make these kinds of accusations," the spokesperson added.

The accusations, however, are unlikely to affect relations between the two countries, political observers say.

"The heightened rhetoric is unlikely to alter the trajectory of India-US relations. Both BJP and [US President-elect Donald] Trump advocate for strong nationalist policies. Therefore, the party's focus on protecting India's sovereignty aligns with Trump's emphasis on 'Make America Great Again' principles," a senior BJP leader, who asked not to be named, told DW.

Ajay Bisaria, a former Indian diplomat, said that India-US ties "will not be without wrinkles and challenges," including several thorny subjects between the two sides ranging from trade and geopolitical disagreements to US allegations over an unsuccessful assassination plot by India on US soil last year.

New Delhi is cooperating with US authorities in that case.

"Just as the US is expected to differentiate between the BJP and the Indian government, India must recognize the diverse influences within the US administration, including the State Department, the Department of Justice, Congress, the Pentagon, and a White House in transition," said Bisaria.

"The complexity of the US system is aggravated by the current political situation, with a lame-duck president scorching the earth for an incoming administration that has expressed a desire to dismantle the deep state," he added.

What to expect under President Trump?

During his first term, Trump shared warm relations with Modi, and many expect the strong personal rapport to continue this time around despite a more challenging geopolitical landscape. It is unclear how the two leaders would tackle issues such as Russia's war in Ukraine, China's growing influence in Asia, immigration and bilateral trade. C Raja Mohan, a visiting professor at Singapore's Institute of South Asian Studies, stressed that India-US ties would remain strong and the BJP's allegations would have no effect. "The effect is zero. Bilateral trade between the two nations is valued at approximately $200 billion, and this is too valuable a relationship," he told DW. The foreign policy expert pointed out that "over the years, China has been central to the US engagement with India," with New Delhi and Washington sharing the objective of containing Beijing's growing clout in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Both India and the US have their own mechanisms to deal with criticisms and allegations. Moreover, defense ties are at an advanced stage marked by a series of agreements and cooperative initiatives aimed at enhancing military collaboration," Mohan said. *—DW News*

SALAR سالار

Americans favour Musk and Trump equally, claims poll

Elon Musk, clad in tuxedo and black tie, took the stage at President-elect Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort shortly after the election with all the swagger of the winning candidate himself.

"The public has given us a mandate that could not be clearer, the clearest mandate. The people have spoken. The people want change," Musk told the audience of Trump's biggest donors, campaign leaders and appointment seekers. "We are going to shake things up. It's going to be a revolution."

Musk's attachment to Trump has created an alliance between America's most powerful politician and its richest businessman — and roughly the same percentages of Americans have favourable views of each, according to a new poll from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Experts are split on whether that overlap in public opinion is a good or bad thing for Musk's businesses or for Trump's politics. But it could have far-reaching effects in both realms.

Musk, whose net worth tops $400 billion, oversees six businesses while continuing to work closely with Trump: electric car manufacturer Tesla, the X social media platform, space technology company SpaceX, brain link company Neuralink, the startup xAI and tunnelling operator The Boring Co.

"Even though there's a negative impact, in terms of potentially alienating some of their customers that might not be fans of Trump, the benefits far outweigh any negatives when it comes to having a right-hand seat next to Trump in the White House," said Dan Ives, an analyst at Wedbush Securities.

Ross Gerber, CEO of Gerber Kawasaki Wealth and Investment Management, identified himself as an investor in Musk's Tesla and a driver of Tesla's new Cybertruck, the futuristic pickup that has gotten huge amounts of attention but also been the subject of safety concerns and multiple recalls.

"Having your CEO not working at your company and working at the job of having to fire government employees... as a shareholder, I'm paying someone to not work for my company," he said. "As a Cybertruck owner with self-driving that sucks and doesn't work, I'm like, Dude, this isn't fair.'"

But despite his scepticism, Gerber said he won't stop investing in Musk's businesses.

"I've made a lot of money with Elon," he said. "I'm not in the business of investing based on the popularity of CEOs."

Elon Musk and Donald Trump ***PHOTO: PTI***

Musk's favourability is similar to Trump's

Musk doesn't appear to give Trump much boost with people who don't back the incoming president.

He is no more popular with the US public than the president-elect himself, and viewed unfavourably by about half of Americans, according to the AP-NORC poll.

About 4 in 10 Americans have a somewhat or very favourable view of the world's richest person, very similar to the percentage who view Trump positively. Likewise, about half of adults have a somewhat or very unfavourable view of Musk — again, similar to Trump.

Instead, said one political strategist, Musk is the ideal validator for someone who cultivates an image of success in business and who has stocked his Cabinet and key adviser roles with billionaires.

"Trump has always pushed this narrative that he's a successful developer and a very successful businessman. I think having Musk with him is his double-down on this business success, good-for-the-economy, good-for-everybody-making money kind of persona," said Christine Matthews, a national political pollster who has worked for Republicans.

"In this case, Musk is seen as this successful, innovative, tech entrepreneur, frontier-buster."

Musk also has at his disposal X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter that he purchased and turned into a megaphone for conservative ideas.

And having spent an estimated $250 million to support Trump in the election, Musk has signalled he is willing to back Republican primary challenges to GOP members in the House and Senate seeking re-election in 2026 who waver on Trump's appointments and agenda.

Trump has tasked him with leading a group to reduce the size of the federal government and reduce the rulemaking authority of the federal bureaucracy.

Musk retains a wide array of businesses

Tesla stands to make significant gains under a Trump administration with the threat of diminished subsidies for alternative energy and electric vehicles doing the most harm to smaller competitors. Trump's plans for extensive tariffs on Chinese imports make it less likely that Chinese EVs will be sold in bulk in the US anytime soon.

Some analysts believe the billionaire's role will create a very friendly landscape for Tesla over the coming years. Ives, the analyst at Wedbush Securities, said Musk's relationship with Trump could "revolutionise the Tesla story, especially around robotics, AI and autonomous."

Investors, he said, are betting on Musk and see his political ascent as a "champagne moment."

Unlike Gerber, Ives believes that ending the EV credit and taking subsidies from Detroit carmakers, Hyundai and other companies will create only opportunity for Tesla.

"I think Wall Street is starting to fully digest the potential benefits from Musk," Ives said.

Tesla shares closed at a record high on Tuesday, with much of the company's recent gains coming after Trump's victory.

But Gerber feels that jump is because investors believe Tesla will have an advantage when it comes to autonomous driving because Trump could grant the company a national autonomy license.

Still, he thinks Tesla will be the "big loser" of Musk's businesses because of Trump's promise to end the EV tax credit for carmakers.

"For Tesla, I don't see a ton of benefit from this," he said. "Elon is misleading people to say it hurts the competition if the credit goes away."

Musk's other companies — including his artificial intelligence company, xAI — could reap the benefits of working within the Trump administration, he said. *—PTI*

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Bitter rivalry emerging between two old adversaries over Syria

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has opened a new front for geopolitical competition in the Middle East.

Now, however, instead of Iran and Russia playing the most influential roles in Syria, Israel and Turkey see an opportunity to advance their conflicting national and regional security interests.

Under their respective leaders, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, relations between the two countries have deteriorated sharply in recent years. This sets the stage for a bitter showdown over Syria.

A new rivalry is emerging

Turkey is widely reported to have backed the offensive led by the Sunni rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), to drive Assad from power, thus backstabbing Syria's traditional allies, Iran and Russia.

Tehran has intimated that without Turkey's support, HTS would have been unable to achieve its blistering takeover.

Now, with Assad gone, Erdogan is believed to be positioning himself as de facto leader of the Sunni Muslim world. He also wants Turkey to be one of the dominant powers in the region.

Erdoğan has said if the Ottoman Empire had been divided in a different way following its defeat in the First World war, several Syrian cities, including Aleppo and Damascus, would have likely been part of modern-day Turkey.

Turkey immediately reopened its embassy in Damascus after Assad's fall and offered help to HTS in shaping the country's new Islamist order.

As part of this, Erdogan has opposed any concession by HTS to the US-backed Kurdish minority in Syria's northeast, which he regards as supporters of the Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Meanwhile, Israel has taken advantage of the power vacuum in Syria to advance its territorial and security ambitions. It has launched a land incursion into the Syrian side of the strategic Golan Heights and has executed a massive bombardment of Syria's military assets across the country.

Israel's foreign minister said destroying these assets – which included ammunition depots, fighter jets, missiles and chemical weapons storage facilities – was necessary to ensure they didn't fall into the "hands of extremists" that could pose a threat to the Jewish state.

Turkey sees Israel's recent actions in Syria and the occupied Golan Heights as a land grab. Israel's actions have also been denounced by Arab countries, who demand Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity be respected.

Under the leadership of Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan relations between the two nations have deteriorated sharply ***PHOTOS: PTI***

Israel is clearly concerned about the rise to power of an Islamist group and the transformation of Syria into a jihadist state.

This is despite the fact that HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani) has signalled he does not want conflict with Israel. He's also pledged not to allow any groups to use Syria for attacks on Israel.

At the same time, al-Sharaa has called for the withdrawal of Israel from Syrian territory according to a 1974 agreement that followed the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

Bitter foes

Erdogan, Turkey's moderate Islamist President, has long been a supporter of the Palestinian cause and a fierce critic of Israel. But tensions have significantly escalated between the two sides since the start of the Gaza war.

Erdogan has called for an Arab-Islamic front to stop what he's called Israel's "genocide" in Gaza. He has equally berated Israel's invasion of Lebanon earlier this year.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, has lashed out at Erdoğan over the years. He has called him a "joke" and "dictator" whose jails are full of journalists and political prisoners. He has also accused Erdoğan of committing a "genocide" of the Kurdish people.

Washington, which is allied to both Turkey and Israel, has launched intense diplomatic efforts to ensure that HTS moves Syria in a favourable direction. It is keen to see a post-Assad system of governance aligned with America's interests.

These interests include HTS' support for America's Kurdish allies in northeast Syria and the continued presence of 1,000 American troops in the country. The US also wants HTS to continue to prevent the Islamic State terror group from regaining strength.

The US will also have to manage the emerging geopolitical rivalry between Israel and Turkey in Syria.

Some observers have not ruled out the possibility of an Israeli-Turkish military showdown, should Israel turn what it calls its temporary occupation of the demilitarised zone on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights into a permanent territorial acquisition.

This is not to say a war between them is imminent. But their clashing interests and the breadth of mutual hostility has certainly reached a new level.

Iran's loss could be costly

For Iran, Assad's ouster means the loss of a critical ally in its predominantly Shia "axis of resistance" against Israel and the United States.

The Iranian regime had worked hard to build this network over the last 45 years as a fundamental part of its national and wider security. It had propped up Assad's minority Alawite dictatorship over the Sunni majority population in Syria at the cost of some USD 30 billion since the popular uprising against Assad began in 2011.

And with Assad now gone, Iran is deprived of a vital land and air bridge to one of its key proxies – Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The Assad regime's sudden demise is now causing soul searching in Tehran about the wisdom of its regional strategy – and whether it will have any significant role at all in the new Syria.

This seems unlikely, as al-Sharaa (the leader of HTS) has declared his disdain for both Iran and Hezbollah.

Al-Sharaa has prioritised the establishment of a publicly mandated Islamist government and Syria's reconstruction and national unity over a conflict with Israel, Iran's arch enemy. This will no doubt lead to contention with the hardliners and reformists in Iran.

Only time will tell how all of this will play out. At this stage, the future of Syria and the region hangs in the balance. And much depends on whether HTS leaders will move to set up an all-inclusive political system and unite a Balkanised Syria. *—PTI*

US eases H1B visa norms, to benefit Indians

The new rules include flexibilities for F-1 students transitioning to H-1B status

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

The outgoing Biden administration has relaxed rules for H-1B visas that will make it easier for American companies to hire foreign workers with special skills and facilitate a smoother transition from F-1 student visas to H-1B visas. This move is likely to benefit thousands of Indian tech professionals.

The most sought-after H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

The rule, announced by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on Tuesday, aims to provide greater flexibility to employers and workers by modernising the definition and criteria for special positions and nonprofit and governmental research organisations that are exempt from the annual statutory limit on H-1B visas.

According to the DHS, the rule also extends certain flexibilities for students on F-1 visas seeking to change their status to H-1B to avoid disruptions in lawful status and employment authorisation for students holding F-1 visas.

It also will allow US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process applications more quickly for most individuals who had previously been approved for an H1-B visa.

It will also allow H1-B visa holders with a controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions.

The DHS said the rule also strengthens the programme's integrity by codifying USCIS' authority to conduct inspections and impose penalties for failure to comply; requiring that the employer must establish that it has a bona fide position in a speciality occupation available for the worker as of the requested start date. —*PTI*

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

- It will also allow H1-B visa holders with a controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions.

US SETTLES PRISON SEXUAL ABUSE CASE WITH $116M

NEW YORK, 18 DEC

The US government will pay nearly USD 116 million to resolve lawsuits brought by more than 100 women who say they were abused or mistreated at a now-shuttered federal prison in California that was known as the "rape club" because of rampant staff-on-inmate sexual misconduct.

Under settlements approved Tuesday, the Justice Department will pay an average of about USD 1.1 million to each of 103 women who filed individual lawsuits against the Bureau of Prisons over their treatment at the Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin, California.

The settlement follows one in a separate class-action last week in which the Bureau of Prisons agreed to open some of its facilities to a court-appointed monitor and publicly acknowledge pervasive abuse and retaliation at FCI Dublin.

The settlements cover a wave of lawsuits seeking compensation from the Bureau of Prisons after a warden at FCI Dublin went to prison for sexually abusing inmates. —*PTI*

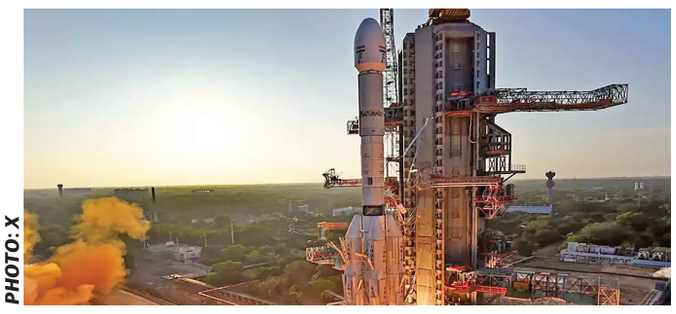


PHOTO: X

US to revise policy for space tie up with India

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

The outgoing Biden administration is in the process of finalising a national security memorandum that will update America's export control policies under the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). This move is likely to facilitate more cooperation between India and US companies in the space sector, the White House said Tuesday.

The goal of updating export control policies under the MTCR is to be able to advance commercial space cooperation even further with close partners like India, Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer told reporters during a conference call here.

Finer, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Indian Ambassador to the US Vinay Kwatra visited Houston on Tuesday and met the astronauts of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) who are training at NASA's Johnson Space Center to execute a joint effort of the International Space Station next year.

Created in 1987 by G-7 countries, MTCR is an informal political understanding among 35 member states that seeks to limit the proliferation of missiles and missile technology. India joined MTCR in 2016. —*PTI*

Chennai-born American crowned Miss India USA 2024

Chennai-born Indian American teenager Caitlin Sandra Neil was crowned Miss India USA 2024 at the annual pageant held in New Jersey. Caitlin, 19, was born in Chennai and has been living in the USA for the last 14 years

Canada sanctions 5 Venezuelan officials

CARACAS, 18 DEC

Canada imposed economic sanctions on Tuesday on five Venezuelan officials, including the head of the country's high court, accusing them of engaging in electoral fraud during the disputed July presidential election. Both Venezuela's incumbent President Nicolás Maduro and the political opposition — with its candidate Edmundo González, who is now in exile in Spain, and its leader Maria Corina Machado, who is in hiding in Venezuela — claim to have won the 28 July vote. Tuesday's announcement from Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly marked the fourth time Canada has sanctioned individuals linked to Maduro's government. Maduro's government swiftly denounced the sanctions as "extortionate measures" and "a failed attempt to pressure Venezuela." The development comes less than a month before Venezuela's next presidential term is set to begin. —*PTI*

3 security forces killed during polio drive in Pak

PESHAWAR, 18 DEC

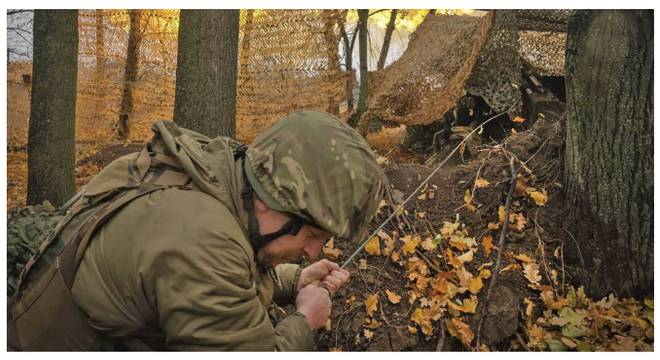
Three security forces personnel have been killed and two others injured in a blast targeting a vehicle carrying polio workers in northwest Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The incident occurred in the Daraban area of Dera Ismail Khan district on Tuesday when a security forces vehicle enroute for polio duty was struck by a roadside blast triggered through an improvised explosive device (IED). No group has claimed responsibility for the attack so far. The attack comes a day after a polio worker and a police constable were shot dead in separate incidents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province as the country began a week-long polio eradication campaign amid tight security. Assailants opened fire and killed a polio worker in Bannu on the very first day of the anti-polio drive that commenced across Pakistan on Monday. —*PTI*

Indiana executes 1st man in 15 years

MICHIGAN, 18 DEC

An Indiana man convicted of killing four people including his brother and his sister's fiancé decades ago was put to death Wednesday, without any independent witness, marking the state's first execution in 15 years. Corcoran was scheduled to be executed with the powerful sedative pentobarbital. Corcoran's execution was the 24th in the US this year. He was convicted in the July 1997 shootings of his brother, 30-year-old James Corcoran, his sister's fiancé, 32-year-old Robert Scott Turner, and two other men, Timothy G Bricker, 30, and Douglas A. Stillwell, 30. Before Corcoran fatally shot the four victims he was under stress because the forthcoming marriage of his sister to Turner would necessitate moving out of the Fort Wayne, Indiana, home he shared with his brother and sister. While jailed for those killings, Corcoran reportedly bragged about fatally shooting his parents in 1992 in northern Indiana's Steuben. —*PTI*

Hundreds of North Korean troops killed in war with Ukraine



A serviceman of the 13th Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine fires Giatsint-B gun towards Russian positions near Kharkiv **PHOTO: PTI**

WASHINGTON, 18 DEC

A couple hundred North Korean troops fighting alongside Russian forces against Ukraine have been killed or wounded during battle in the Kursk border region, a senior military official said Tuesday.

The official didn't provide details on exactly how many have been killed, but said the North Korean forces don't appear to be battle-hardened, which contributes to the number of casualties they've had. The official was providing the first significant estimate of North Korean casualties, which comes several weeks after Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost 3-year war.

The White House and Pentagon on Monday confirmed that the North Korean forces have been battling on the front lines in largely infantry positions. They have been fighting with Russian units and, in some cases, independently around Kursk. The casualty disclosure comes as the Biden administration is pressing to send as much military aid as possible to Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump takes over. But a defence official told reporters that the US may not be able to send all of the remaining USD 5.6 billion in weapons to Ukraine before 20 January. —*PTI*

Russia detains suspect in killing of senior general

MOSCOW, 18 DEC

Russia's security service said Wednesday that it has detained a suspect in the killing of a senior general in Moscow.

The suspect was described as an Uzbek citizen recruited by Ukrainian intelligence services.

Lt Gen Igor Kirillov was killed Tuesday by a bomb hidden in a scooter outside his apartment building in Moscow, a day after Ukraine's security service levelled criminal charges against him. His assistant also died in the attack. A Ukrainian official said the service carried out the attack.

Russia's Federal Security Service said the suspect had been promised a reward of USD 1,00,000 and permission to move to a European Union country.

The agency stated that the suspect travelled to Moscow, where he picked up a homemade explosive device. He then placed the device on an electric scooter and parked it at the entrance to the residential building where Kirillov lived.

The suspect faces "a sentence of up to life imprisonment." —*PTI*

VIOLATES UN RULE

Israel occupies Syria buffer zone

JERUSALEM, 18 DEC

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israeli forces will stay in a buffer zone on the Syrian border, seized after the ouster of Syria's president Bashar Assad, until another arrangement is in place "that ensures Israel's security."

Netanyahu made the comments from the summit of Mount Hermon — the highest peak in the area — inside Syria, about 10km from the border with the Israel-held Golan Heights.

It appeared to be the first time a sitting Israeli leader had set foot that far into Syria. Netanyahu said he had been on the same mountaintop 53 years ago as a soldier, but the summit's importance to Israel's security has only increased given recent events.

Israel seized a swath of southern Syria along the border with the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights days after Assad was ousted by rebels last week.

Israel's capture of the buffer zone, a roughly 400sq km demilitarised area in Syrian territory, has sparked condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating a 1974 ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria in the wake of Assad's ouster to make a land grab.

An Israeli military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with military regulations, said there is no plan to evacuate the Syrians living in villages within the buffer zone.

The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the UN after the 1973 Mideast war. A UN force of about 1,100 troops had patrolled the area since then.

A UN spokesman said Tuesday that the advance of Israeli troops, however long it lasts, violates the 1974 deal that set up the buffer zone. —*PTI*

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made the comments from the summit of Mount Hermon — the highest peak inside Syria **PHOTO: PTI**

14 die as 7.3 magnitude quake rattles Vanuatu

WELLINGTON, 18 DEC

A magnitude 7.3 earthquake that struck off Vanuatu killed at least 14 people, injured hundreds more and caused widespread damage across the South Pacific island nation, officials said Wednesday, with the figure expected to rise.

Frantic rescue efforts began after the quake hit early on Tuesday afternoon. Rescuers worked through the night to reach people crying for help from under the rubble, with some rescued and others still trapped. A near total telecommunications collapse meant little was known about conditions outside the city and people struggled to contact the missing. The earthquake hit at a depth of 57km. —*PTI*

25 killed after overcrowded boat capsizes in Congo

KINSHASA, 18 DEC

An overcrowded boat capsized on a river in central Congo on Tuesday, killing at least 25 people, including children, and leaving dozens missing, officials and local residents said.

The vessel was believed to have more than 100 passengers on board after leaving from the town of Inongo, northeast of the capital of Kinshasa.

It capsized a few hundred metres (yards) into the journey along the Fimi River, the latest such tragedy to strike Congo.

A search was underway for the missing hours later on Tuesday as concerns rose that the death toll could be far higher.

At least 78 people drowned in October when an overloaded boat sank in the country's east while 80 lost their lives in a similar accident near Kinshasa in June. —*PTI*

Japan's space firm loses 2nd rocket

TOKYO, 18 DEC

A Japanese space startup said its second attempt to launch a rocket carrying satellites into orbit was aborted minutes after liftoff on Wednesday and destroyed itself again, nine months after the company's first launch attempt ended in an explosion.

Space One's Kairos No. 2 rocket lifted off from a coastal site in Wakayama prefecture of central Japan.

The company said it aborted the flight after concluding that it was unlikely to complete its mission. "We are very sorry that we could not achieve as far as a final stage of the mission," said Space One President Masakazu Toyoda on Wednesday. "We don't consider this a failure because we are getting valuable data that will help in our next challenge." Company executive and space engineer Mamoru Endo said the abnormality in the first stage engine nozzle or its control system is likely to have caused an unstable flight of the rocket, which started spiralling in midflight and eventually destroyed itself about three minutes after liftoff, using its autonomous safety mechanism.

The rocket, which rose higher than 100km above ground, entered space before it was destroyed, officials said. —*PTI*

The company said it aborted the flight after concluding that it was unlikely to complete its mission **PHOTO: PTI**

Pak seminaries will not be a part of govt: Clerics

ISLAMABAD, 18 DEC

Pakistani clerics made it clear to the government that their seminaries would remain independent of official influence by not becoming part of government department, a departure from the stance adopted by them in 2019.

In 2019, traditional madrassas boards had agreed to cede some control to the federal education ministry.

The Ittehad Tanzeemat-i-Madaris Pakistan, a representative body of seminaries run by clerics belonging to different sects of Islam, made the announcement after a meeting on Tuesday. A joint delegation of clerics called on Maulana Fazlur Rehman, chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) at his residence in Islamabad to throw their weight behind him in the controversy of a bill regarding registration of madrassas. He is pressing the government to issue a gazette notification for the Societies Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024, which would roll back the 2019 agreement and make the district administration the authority to carry registration of seminaries. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

WISCONSIN TRAGEDY

School shooting: Motive eludes cops

MADISON, 18 DEC

The motive for a shooting that killed a teacher and a student and wounded six others at a Wisconsin school appears to be a "combination of factors," a police chief said on Tuesday as he appealed to the public to share what they might know about the 15-year-old girl who attacked a study hall before shooting herself.

Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes offered no details about a possible motive, though he said bullying at Abundant Life Christian School would be investigated.

Barnes said police are also investigating writings that may have been penned by Natalie Rupnow and could shed light on her actions.

PHOTO: X

"Identifying a motive is our top priority, but at this time, it appears that the motive is a combination of factors," the chief said.

Barnes gave the number to a tip line for anyone who might have known the shooter and her feelings.

"There are always signs of a school shooting before it occurred. We're looking into her online activity," he said.

In addition to the deaths, six people were wounded, including two students who remain in critical condition. The shooter died of a self-inflicted gunshot.

Barnes made the remarks at a news conference but left without taking questions from reporters, leaving the Madison mayor and Dane County executive to face the media. They declined to disclose the names of the victims.

"Leave them alone," Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway snapped. Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school – prekindergarten through high school – in Madison with approximately 420 students. —*PTI*

US CEO KILLER CHARGED WITH ACT OF TERROR

NEW YORK, 18 DEC

The man accused of killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO has been charged with murder as an act of terrorism, prosecutors said on Tuesday as they worked to bring him to a New York court from a Pennsylvania jail.

Luigi Mangione already was charged with murder in the 4 December killing of Brian Thompson, but the terror allegation is new. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said Thompson's death on a midtown Manhattan street "was a killing that was intended to evoke terror. And we've seen that reaction." Thompson, 50, was shot while walking to a hotel holding an investor conference. —*PTI*

Mkt extends losses into 3rd session on foreign outflows

Sensex tumbles 502.25 points to settle at 80,182.20

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty stayed on the back foot for the third straight session on Wednesday as investors offloaded utility, capital goods and metal stocks amid foreign fund outflows.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled 502.25 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 80,182.20, taking its downtrend to the third day. During the day, it tanked 634.38 points or 0.78 per cent to 80,050.07.

The NSE Nifty declined 137.15 points or 0.56 per cent to 24,198.85.

"The near-term market construct has turned weak, with FIIs turning sellers on rallies. Yesterday's massive FII sell figure of Rs 6,410 crore in the cash market indicates that more selling is in store on market bounces.

Nifty declines 137.15 points or 0.56 per cent to 24,198.85 **PHOTO: PTI**

From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Tata Motors, Power Grid, NTPC, Adani Ports, JSW Steel, ICICI Bank, Larsen & Toubro and Bajaj Finance were the main laggards.

In contrast, Tata Consultancy Services, Reliance Industries, Tech Mahindra and HCL Technologies were the gainers.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 6,409.86 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled higher, while Tokyo ended lower.

European markets were trading in the positive territory in mid-session deals. Wall Street ended lower on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.48 per cent to USD 73.67 a barrel.

Falling for the second day in a row, the BSE benchmark tanked 1,064.12 points or 1.30 per cent to settle at 80,684.45 on Tuesday. The Nifty tumbled 332.25 points or 1.35 per cent to 24,336. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 3P to close at all-time low of 84.94

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

The rupee dropped 3 paise to close at an all-time low of 84.94 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, as traders await cues from the US Fed on the interest rate front. Forex traders said dollar demand from importers as well as foreign banks, foreign fund outflows and a muted trend in domestic equities further dented investor sentiments. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 84.92 against the greenback, and touched 84.95 during intraday trade. The unit finally ended the session lower by 3 paise at an all-time low closing level of 84.94 (provisional) against the dollar. On Tuesday, the rupee revisited its all-time low closing level of 84.91 against the US dollar. Moreover, the rising trade deficit added strain on the rupee. This increase in trade deficit was driven largely by record-high gold imports in November. *—PTI*

PHOTO:ANI

Gold falls ₹200 to ₹79,100 per 10 gm; silver rises ₹500

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Gold prices fell Rs 200 to Rs 79,100 per 10 grams in the national capital on Wednesday amid a firm trend in international markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity settled at Rs 79,300 per 10 grams in the previous session. Snapping a three-day losing run, silver climbed Rs 500 to Rs 92,000 per kg on Wednesday. It closed at Rs 91,500 per kg on Tuesday. In the last three sessions, the white metal plunged Rs 5,500 per kg. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity slipped Rs 200 to Rs 78,700 per 10 grams from the previous close of Rs 78,900 per 10 grams on Tuesday. However, silver contracts slipped Rs 45, or 0.05 per cent, to Rs 90,830 per kg on the exchange. *—PTI*

Indian REITs panel appoints Alok as Chairman

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The Indian REITs Association (IRA) has appointed Alok Aggarwal, MD and CEO of Brookfield India Real Estate Trust, as its new Chairman. Established in 2023, the IRA is a non-profit trade organisation that supports the growth and development of India's Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) sector. Its founding members include Brookfield India Real Estate Trust, Embassy Office Parks REIT, Mindspace Business Parks REIT, and Nexus Select Trust. Commenting on his new role, Aggarwal said the role of chairman has come at a time when REITs have established a strong foothold in the Indian capital market and are poised for significant growth. *—PTI*

Kalpataru Projects International raises ₹1,000 cr via QIP

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Kalpataru Projects International (KPIL) on Wednesday said it has raised Rs 1,000 crore through the issuance of equity shares on a QIP basis. This marks KPIL's first equity raise in over a decade, the company said in a statement. KPIL, a diversified Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) company with over four decades of experience, has successfully raised Rs 1,000 crore through a Qualified Institutional Placement (QIP). The QIP witnessed an overwhelming response from a diverse group of investors, including domestic mutual funds, foreign investment funds and insurance companies. KPIL is currently executing projects in over 30 countries and has a global footprint in 75 countries. *—PTI*

NON-TARIFF IN FUTURE

'India must brace up for duty measures'

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

India will have to prepare itself in future to deal with potential non-tariff and unilateral duty-related barriers like the EU carbon tax, a senior government official said on Wednesday.

Director General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said countries like the US and the European Union (EU) are trying to boost their domestic manufacturing through such measures.

"The US has been trying to boost its domestic manufacturing through the Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS Act. The EU is trying to do it through CBAM (Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism). ...deforestation regulation is another mechanism of putting non-tariff barriers on goods coming from developing economies.

"So both the combination of non-tariff measures and potential tariff measures in clear violation of WTO (World Trade Organisation) commitments are something which India has to brace up in future to deal with," Sarangi said at CII's export competitiveness conclave.

About US President-elect Donald Trump's threat to impose higher duties, he said one has to wait and see the fine-prints of these measures.

The DGFT said, "What I have understood from what he (Trump) was saying is that his main intent is that reciprocity will matter in future, he said. *—PTI*

Vishal Mega Mart, Mobikwik make stunning market debut

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Shares of Vishal Mega Mart (VMM) jumped 41 per cent in debut trade on Wednesday against the issue price of Rs 78.

The stock listed at Rs 110, rallying 41 per cent from the issue price on the BSE. Later, it surged 42.24 per cent to Rs 110.95. At the NSE, it listed at Rs 104, a jump of 33.33 per cent from the issue price.

The Vishal mart's market valuation stood at Rs 48,644.57 crore. The Rs 8,000-crore initial public offer (IPO) of the VMM received 27.28 times subscription on the closing day of bidding on Friday. The IPO had a price range of Rs 74–78 apiece and was entirely an Offer-for-Sale (OFS) of shares.

Meanwhile, shares of fintech firm One Mobikwik Systems (OMS) on Wednesday listed with a premium of over 58 per cent against the issue price of Rs 279.

Vishal mart's market valuation stood at Rs 48,644.57 crore **PHOTO: X**

The stock began the trade at Rs 442.25, reflecting a jump of 58.51 per cent from the issue price on the BSE. Later, it zoomed 87.81 per cent to Rs 524. At the NSE, shares of the firm listed at Rs 440, surging 57.70 per cent.

The company's market valuation stood at Rs 3,435.68 crore. The IPO received 119.38 times subscription on Friday.

The Rs 572-crore initial share sale had a price band of Rs 265–279 per share. It had a fresh issuance of equity shares worth up to Rs 572 crore with no OFS component. *—PTI*

Employers can file wage details till 31 Jan for higher pension

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Retirement fund body EPFO has extended time till 31 January, 2025 for employers to upload wage details etc regarding 3.1 lakh pending applications for pension on higher wages.

An online facility was made available by EPFO for submitting applications for validation of options/joint options for pension on higher wages, a labour ministry statement said.

The facility was for eligible pensioners or members in compliance with the Supreme Court order on 4 November, 2022. It was launched on 26 February, 2023 and was to remain available only till 3 May, 2023.

However, considering representations of employees, the time was extended to 26 June, 2023 in order to provide complete four months to eligible pensioners/members for filing applications.

PHOTO:X

- A last opportunity of 15 days was further given to remove any difficulty faced by them

A last opportunity of 15 days was further given to remove any difficulty faced by them.

Accordingly, the last date for submission of applications was extended to July 11, 2023 and a total of 17.49 lakh applications were received from pensioners/members till July 11, 2023.

In spite of so many extensions, it has been observed that more than 3.1 lakh applications for validation of options / joint options are still pending with employers.

Many representations have been received from Employers & Employers' Associations, requesting extending the time further.

Employers are also requested to submit replies/update the information by 15 January, 2025, in over 4.66 lakh cases where EPFO has sought additional information/ clarification in respect of applications that have been received and examined by EPFO. *—PTI*

Centre approves 47 ethanol projects in Bihar for loan subsidies

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

A total of 47 projects from Bihar have been issued in-principle approvals for interest subvention on bank loans for establishing new or expanding existing distilleries, the government said on Wednesday.

Currently, 22 ethanol distilleries - 8 molasses-based and 14 grain-based - are operational in Bihar, Minister of State for Food Nimuben Jayatibhai Bambhaniya said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha.

The government is implementing the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme nationwide, with Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) selling petrol blended with ethanol. Under the programme, the government has set a target of 20 per cent ethanol blending with petrol by 2025-26.

To boost ethanol production capacity and meet blending targets, the Centre has introduced various Ethanol Interest Subvention Schemes from 2018 to 2022.

Under these schemes, 47 projects from Bihar have received in-principle approvals, she said.

- For each Ethanol Supply Year, OMCs invite bids from distilleries for ethanol purchase on feedstock

For each Ethanol Supply Year (ESY), OMCs invite bids from distilleries for ethanol purchase based on feedstock availability.

After receiving bids, OMCs allocate ethanol quantities from different feedstocks to be supplied by distilleries during a specific ESY. In cases of feedstock shortages, OMCs have shown flexibility in accepting feedstock change requests and issuing revised allocations. *—PTI*

₹8,126 cr paid to farmers in first 70 days

Sugar mills have paid Rs 8,126 crore to sugarcane farmers in the first 70 days of the ongoing 2024-25 sugar season, Food Minister Pralhad Joshi told Parliament on Wednesday. As of 13 December, the total cane price payable at Rs 11,141 crore, Joshi said in a written reply to Lok Sabha. Pending payments of Rs 3,015 crore remain, with Karnataka with maximum outstanding dues of Rs 1,405 crore, followed by Uttar Pradesh. *—PTI*

Retailer's body seeks low interest rate, retail policy

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Retailers Association of India on Wednesday asked the government to provide lower interest rates to retailers for easier financing while calling to expedite national retail policy to enable ease of doing business, ahead of the upcoming Budget.

In its pre-budget memorandum, Retailers Association of India (RAI) said the Union Budget for FY25-26 should focus on generating demand and spurring consumption by offering benefits or concessions in the form of lower taxes as it will boost the overall consumer sentiment and benefit the retail sector.

Asking for low-cost finance to retailers, RAI said, "There is a need to provide lower interest rates to the retailers through the special announcement in the budget to assure easier financing for the retail businesses."

The government should allocate a special fund and formulate a special trader finance scheme with SIDBI to help millions of independent retailers across the nation by declaring low-cost loans and relaxing some industry guidelines, it added.

PHOTO:X

Demanding the retail sector to be considered as an essential service, RAI said, "F&B retail sector needs to be considered as a priority and an essential service. Subsidies and benefits should be given on land rates and other necessities such as electricity."

RAI also demanded that all the MSME benefits must be extended to retail traders saying that while the government has included retail and wholesale trades as MSMEs and are allowed to be registered on Udyam Registration Portal, the benefits to retail and wholesale trade MSMEs are restricted to priority sector lending only. *—PTI*

'GST meet on Sat will decide on insurance'

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

The proposed rationalisation of GST rates on health and life insurance products will be on the agenda for the upcoming Council meeting on Saturday in Jaisalmer, sources said.

Sources said that the Group of Ministers (GoM) on insurance, chaired by Bihar Minister Samrat Chaudhary, has submitted the report to GST Council.

The GoM was tasked to look into GST rates related to medical insurance and come up with a report so that the GST Council could take up the matter.

Both life insurance and medical insurance premiums attract a GST rate of 18 per cent.

GST rates and exemptions are prescribed on the recommendations of the GST Council, which is a Constitutional body comprising representatives from States/UTs and the Centre. *—PTI*

WORLD'S 3RD BIGGEST AUTO GRP

Honda, Nissan begin merger talks

TOKYO, 18 DEC

Honda and Nissan are considering a merger to create a strong competitor to Toyota in Japan and improve their global market position. Honda is exploring several strategies, including a merger, capital tie-up, or forming a holding company, according to Executive Vice President Shinji Aoyama. This move comes amid reports of ongoing talks.

Honda and Nissan are in early discussions about a possible merger, with one option being the creation of a new holding company for the combined entities. The deal could also involve Mitsubishi Motors, which already has financial ties with Nissan. These talks are confidential, and no final decision has been made yet.

Nissan's stock was expected to rise due to increased buying interest, while Honda's fell by up to 2%. A potential merger between the two would consolidate the Japanese auto industry into two main groups: one led by Honda, Nissan, and Mitsubishi, and another by Toyota and its affiliates. This move would provide the companies with more resources to compete globally, especially after reducing long-standing partnerships, such as Nissan's with Renault and Honda's with General Motors.

Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe with Nissan CEO Makoto Uchida **PHOTO: X**

Nissan and Honda are planning to sign a memorandum of understanding to explore shared equity in a new holding company. This merger aims to help both companies strengthen their position in the electric vehicle market, competing against rivals such as Tesla and Chinese automakers

Honda and Nissan's American depositary receipts rose, with Nissan ADRs increasing by 12 per cent and Honda's by 0.9 per cent. A potential merger could strengthen the companies against Toyota, as Honda, Nissan, and Mitsubishi combined sold about 4 million vehicles, far fewer than Toyota's 5.2 million. *—Agencies*

Airtel now 1st pvt telco to reach border villages

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Bharti Airtel has become the first private telecom operator to launch mobile services in around seven border villages of Kupwara, Baramulla and Bandipore districts of Jammu and Kashmir, the company said on Wednesday.

Under the Vibrant Village Programme, Airtel has connected villages such as Kachhal, Balbir, Razdan Pass, Taya Top, Ustad, Kathi, and Cheema to the rest of the country.

The company has deployed 15 mobile towers in this area, which will benefit the local population and will also offer essential communication connections for soldiers stationed along the Line of Control.

Bharti Airtel has partnered with the Indian Army to bring connectivity to villages in Kupwara, Baramulla and Bandipore districts along the Line of Control in North Kashmir," the statement said.

- The company has deployed 15 mobile towers in this area, which will benefit the local population and will also offer essential communication connections for soldiers

Airtel has collaborated with the Indian Army to improve network services and enhance connectivity in remote areas of military bases.

Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on several occasions has said that all nooks and corners of the country will get telecom connectivity by June 2025. *—PTI*

India to face Pak in opening match of Kho Kho WC

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Hosts India will face arch rivals Pakistan in the opening match of the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup on 13 January, the organisers announced on Wednesday. As many as 24 countries have confirmed their participation in the week-long event (13-19 January), which will be organised at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in the national capital and at the Noida Indoor Stadium. The tournament will see 21 men's and 20 women's teams competing for the top prizes. USA, England, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Brazil are the teams that have confirmed their participation. *—PTI*

PHOTO:X

High schooler Blades Brown is pro golfer at 17

NASHVILLE, 18 DEC

Blades Brown is ready to become a professional golfer even before finishing high school. Brown, a 17-year-old junior in high school in Nashville, Tennessee, announced on social media Tuesday that he will turn pro. He already has accepted an exemption to play a PGA Tour event at The American Express in January. Brown made the cut at the Myrtle Beach Classic in May — a tournament held opposite one of the PGA Tour's signature event — and tied for 26th. Akshay Bhatia also turned pro at age 17 in 2019 and finally reached the PGA Tour four years later when he won an opposite-field event. Ty Tryon earned a PGA Tour card through Q-school in 2001 — he had to wait until 18 to become a member. He made only six cuts in 30 starts. *—PTI*

M'rashtra squad for Vijay Hazare Trophy announced

PUNE, 18 DEC

Ruturaj Gaikwad will continue to lead Maharashtra in their upcoming Vijay Hazare Trophy campaign. Maharashtra on Wednesday announced a 16-member squad for the first two matches, which will be played in Mumbai on 21 and 23 December against Rajasthan and Services in their Elite Group B fixtures. Maharashtra were eliminated by Kerala in the prelim quarterfinals last season. Squad: Ruturaj Gaikwad (c), Om Bhosale, Siddhesh Veer, Ankeet Bawane, Rahul Tripathi, Azim Kazi, Nikhil Naik (wk), Dhanraj Shinde (wk), Hitesh Walunj, Rajvardhan Hangargekar, Mukesh Choudhary, Rajneesh Gurbani, Pradeep Dadhe, Satyajeet Bachhav, Divyang Hinganekar, Prashant Solanki. *—PTI*

6 teams pick 48 players for World Pickleball League

MUMBAI, 18 DEC

A total of 48 players were picked by six franchises in the player draft for the inaugural edition of the World Pickleball League which will be held here next month. While the players draft consisted of 75 players from 20 countries, the tournament will feature men and women players from 14 countries including India, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom. WBPL, which works closely with All Indian Pickleball Association (AIPA), is co-founded by former Indian tennis players Gaurav Natekar and Arati Ponnappa Natekar and will be held from 24 January to 2 February. The six franchises in the tournament will represent Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Delhi. The owners were guided by the league during the player draft here on Wednesday. A total of eight players will be in each team including four men and as many women including a mandatory Indian player. *—PTI*

Ashwin: The man who avoided playing safe

Ashwin's top overseas Test moment was battling with injured Vihari for 40 overs

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

Ravichandran Ashwin sparred with his insecurities as a child for far too long and perhaps didn't want to be dragged into a rigmarole of insecurities once again.

It is for this reason that an abrupt retirement from international cricket would not seem out of the blue for anyone who has followed the man's journey. It could have happened in Sydney after the fifth Test against Australia but he didn't want to hang around.

No one had to tell him that it was time to walk away from the game that consumed nearly three decades of his 38-year-old existence. Ashwin, the straight-shooter, did a cameo presser to let the world know in John Denver style "My bags are packed and I am ready go".

He wore many hats as an active international cricketer and it would take just a five-minute conversation with him would be enough to know that he can see through word salad quite easily.

It is very difficult to stereotype Ashwin even after 14 years at the top level. The 765 international wickets are not a good enough data to decode the veteran, who admitted to being insecure as a kid in his book.

So when he told his teammates about his decision, he didn't care whether his 106 Test matches could become 107 or for that matter 108. It didn't matter anymore. Ashwin played 116 ODIs for India, claiming 156 wickets, while his 65 T20 International outings yielded 72 scalps. He expressed his gratitude towards the BCCI and other senior teammates for his career which began in 2010 in the one-day format before he made his Test debut a year later.

He never believed that an off-spinner can only bowl doosra (the wrong 'un) with a legal action. But he developed his own wrong 'un, patented it as "carrom ball", which could be bowled with a flick of middle finger and thumb and beats the outside edge of a right hander.

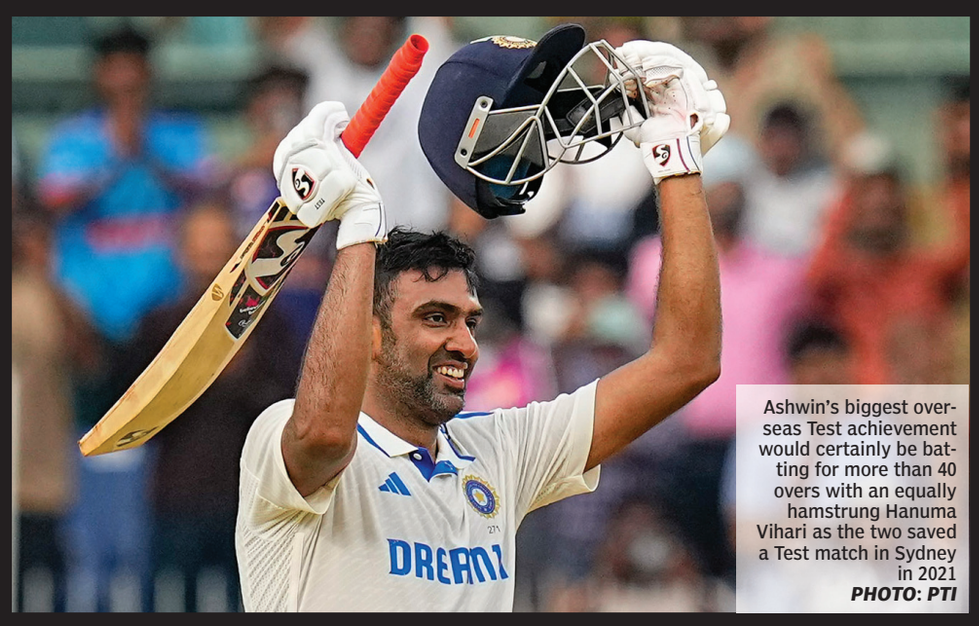
From 2011 till the series against England, he was lethal at home.

Ashwin's biggest overseas Test achievement would certainly be batting for more than 40 overs with an equally hamstrung Hanuma Vihari as the two saved a Test match in Sydney in 2021.

If 'Gabba' was India's Sholay, Sydney certainly was 'Ankur'. 'Spirit of Cricket' in garb of cheating was unacceptable to him.

He always had a plan B, be it buying a cricket team in the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association league or a squad in the Global Chess League.

Ravichandran Ashwin, the cricketer will always be one of a kind. A sequel to 'I Have The Streets' would be as fascinating *—PTI*



Ashwin's biggest overseas Test achievement would certainly be batting for more than 40 overs with an equally hamstrung Hanuma Vihari as the two saved a Test match in Sydney in 2021
PHOTO: PTI

- He always had a plan B, be it buying a cricket team in the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association league or a squad in the Global Chess League

Wrong time to retire, says Gavaskar

Brisbane, 18 DEC

Batting legend Sunil Gavaskar didn't appreciate the timing of R Ashwin's retirement call on Wednesday, saying the premier off-spinner could have waited for the series against "He could have said, listen after the end of the series, I won't be available for selection . What it does is that, similarly when MS Dhoni retired at the end of the third Test in 2014-15 series, it leaves you one short," Gavaskar said.

—PTI

"I've played with you for 14 years... it made me a bit emotional" -Virat Kolhi

"Generations of bowlers will say they became a bowler because of Ashwin" -Gautam Gambir

"Every ball felt like a chance waiting to happen" -Ajinkya Rahane

"You were an invaluable asset during my tenure as coach" -Ravi Shastri

"Your journey has been nothing short of extraordinary" -Anil Kumble

"The impact you've had on cricket in India and world over is massive" -Jasprit Bumrah

BORDER GAVASKAR TROPHY

Rain plays spoilsport again as 3rd Test ends in a draw

BRISBANE, 18 DEC

India escaped with a crucial draw in the weather-hit third Test against Australia after intermittent rain wiped out majority of play on day five, leaving the five-match series tantalisingly locked at 1-1.

Resuming the day at 252 for nine, India batted for 24 balls and were all out for 260 in their first innings.

With limited time left in the day to force a result after majority of the morning session was rained out, the Australian batters came out all guns blazing and stuttered to 89 for seven in 18 overs before making a brave declaration, giving India at least 54 overs to chase down 275.

India would have fancied chasing 275 on day five but weather helped them immensely in the game controlled by Australia.

Jasprit Bumrah (3/18) was brilliant as usual in the second innings with Mohammed Siraj (2/36) and Akash Deep (2/28) offering good support.

Australia's approach was brave and questionable at the same time. Barring K L Rahul, who has been India's standout batter on the tour, the star-studded line up has not found a way to negotiate the threats posed by the Australian pace attack.

Rohit Sharma said it is high time the NCA provides clarity on Mohammed Shami's fitness, emphasising that he won't risk fielding the pacer in the ongoing Border Gavaskar series until they are sure of his condition. "It's high time somebody from NCA talks about him. Really, that's our National Cricket Academy where he is doing his rehab.

"I have not batted well. There's no harm in accepting that. But I know what's in my mind, how I'm preparing myself. It's just about spending as much time as possible, which I'm pretty sure I'm just there" -Rohit Sharma

Those guys are the ones who need to come up and give us some kind of update," Rohit said during the post-match press conference. *—PTI*

Saim, Salman shine in Pak's ODI win over SA

PAARL, 18 DEC

Career-best performances by allrounder Salman Agha led Pakistan to a series-opening win over South Africa in their one-day international on Tuesday.

Salman's unbeaten 82 from 90 balls finished off Pakistan's well-paced victory by three wickets with three balls remaining.

That came after his part-time off-spin took 4-32 and tore out South Africa's top order, starting the Proteas' gradual decline to a below-par 239-9.

Pakistan's chase of 240 was in deep trouble at 60-4 in the 20th over. Then Salman was dropped behind the wickets on 6 off Aiden Markram. But he didn't offer another chance.

Salman was initially supporting opener Saim Ayub to rescue their side.

Saim, who was stranded on 98 not out in a Twenty20 last Friday, achieved his second ODI century. He was out for 109 off 119 balls, caught at fine leg after pulling Kagiso Rabada.

South Africa chose to bat first and openers Tony de Zorzi and Ryan Rickelton made a flying start at 70 without loss at the end of the powerplay.

South Africa, with one eye on the following test series in which it's trying to reach the World Test Championship final, rested captain Temba Bavuma and suffered a late withdrawal when spinner Keshav Maharaj injured his groin just before the toss. The second ODI is on Thursday in Cape Town. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

WA AWAITS INDIA'S BID FOR 2029 WC: COE

NEW DELHI, 18 DEC

World Athletics President Sebastian Coe said his organisation will "await with interest" India's expected bid for the 2029 World Championships (WC) but indicated that there will be tough competition from other countries to get the hosting right of the showpiece.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) is set to formally express its interest to host the 2029 World Championships when the process is launched in the next few months, in line with the country's plan to stage a series of high-profile events to mount a serious bid for the 2036 Olympics.

"The 2029 World Championships, look, we will await with interest (India's expected bid). I have to tell you, we've got a lot of interest in those Championships already, and the process will open shortly," Coe told the global media. *—PTI*

US defender Becky retires after 16 years

CHICAGO,18 DEC

Becky Sauerbrunn, a former captain of the U.S. women's team who played in three Olympics and three Women's World Cups, announced her retirement Tuesday from professional soccer after a 16-year international career.

Sauerbrunn, 39, also played in the National Women's Soccer League for every year it has existed and was a four-time league Defender of the Year. She won two championships with FC Kansas City and another with the Portland Thorns. She also played with the Utah Royals.

Sauerbrunn became a consistent starter for the national team, starting 167 of her 182 games between 2013 and 2024. She ends her international career with 219 caps, good for 10th all-time in national team history. She was a key player in the United States' runs to World Cup titles in 2015 in Canada and 2019 in France. She played every minute in Canada and sat out only the first game in France. The US allowed just three goals during each tournaments. *—PTI*

Kaur's fall worries India in T20 against WI

NAVI MUMBAI, 18 DEC

India will look to make amends in all areas and counter the West Indies' power game when the two teams face off in the decider of the women's T20I series on Thursday, with regular skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's participation still shrouded in uncertainty.

A comprehensive 49-run win in the series opener helped India extend their domination in the format to nine consecutive victories but West Indies crushed the hosts by nine wickets to level the terms in the second game.

The manner in which West Indies cruised to win with 26 balls and nine wickets to spare, hitting a total of 27 fours and two sixes, the visitors left India scrambling for answers.

None of the Indian bowlers could pose any threat as heavy dew made their job only tougher. On their part, the West Indies used the conditions to their benefit. They send the balls to the ropes more, rather than attempting to hit sixes, which also worked in their favour.

The conditions are not expected to change much in a day's time but India will be required to change a lot in terms of their collective batting and bowling, aside from concerns over the availability of Kaur. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

FIFA AWARDS: A NIGHT OF CHAMPIONS, RECORDS & GOALS

The FIFA Best Player Award will recognise the leading players of the year of women's and men's football at both club and national-team levels.

WHO WON WHAT?

- **Vinícius Júnior:** FIFA Men's Player of the Year
- **Aitana Bonmatí:** FIFA Women's Player of the Year
- **Carlo Ancelotti:** Best Men's Coach
- **Emma Hayes:** Best Women's Coach
- **Emiliano Martínez:** Men's Goalkeeper of the Year
- **Alyssa Naeher:** Women's Goalkeeper of the Year
- **Alejandro Garnacho:** FIFA PuskásAward for Best Goal
- **Marta:** FIFA Marta Award for Goal of the Year

How are the winners chosen?

Winners are decided by an 'equally weighted voting system' by fans, the current captains and coaches of all national teams, and media representatives

Macario leads Chelsea to beat Madrid 2–1

MADRID, 18 DEC

United States striker Catarina Macario entered as a halftime substitute and converted two penalties for Chelsea in a 2–1 win over Real Madrid that helped the English club finish top of its Women's Champions League group with a 100 per cent record on Tuesday.

Madrid was already sure of qualifying for the quarterfinals along with Chelsea, but needed a win at Estadio Alfredo Di Stefano to go through as the Group B winner.

They were on course for victory when Caroline Weir opened the scoring in the seventh minute after her shot could only be parried onto the post by Chelsea goalkeeper Hannah Hampton and into the net. Macario was brought on at halftime and made difference, with her incisiveness leading to a penalty when she was tripped by Olga Carmona.

Chelsea won all six of its group games and has yet to lose this season under new coach Sonia Bompastor
PHOTO: X

Brazil-born Macario curled a right-footed shot high into the net in the 51st minute and converted a second penalty into almost exactly the same spot in the 56th after Chelsea midfielder Wieke Kaptein flicked the ball into the outstretched left hand of Carmona. Chelsea won all six of its group games and has yet to lose this season under new coach Sonia Bompastor. In the Women's Super League in England, Chelsea has won nine games and drawn the other. *—PTI*